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Chapter 1: Waking up in Heck

Man's greatest fear lay before me, a truth terrible enough to fell even the most stalwart warriors. It took neither the form of the Avatar of Death nor the IRS, as I was thankfully unbeholden to such memento mori. No wait, this was much worse…

"M-Mike?!" shouted a woman. Her auburn hair was a disheveled mess, and covered most of her beet-red face as she grabbed at the nearby bedsheets to preserve what was left of her modesty. "What the hell are you doing here?!"

"So this is Mike, huh?" asked the man sitting in bed next to her. His name was Jeff. He had a sturdy frame and half a foot on me, along with a cocky grin that screamed he'd just had sex with my girlfriend or something.

Well, that was exactly what had happened. Jeff just had sex with my girlfriend. He also had the nerve to gloat about it. And there I stood staring at the two, paralyzed by an overwhelming emotion. The funny thing was that said emotion wasn't despair, confusion, or even wrath. It was apathy.

"Aww, poor old Mike, cat got your tongue?" laughed Jeff, getting up to stare me down. "Don't have anything to say?"

Truth be told, I didn't. I would've called the man intimidating, if it weren't for his ridiculous mullet and the terribly tiny thing sticking out of his crotch. But it did make me think; why? It wasn't shock or some kind of coping mechanism, I genuinely didn't feel anything for these two. It was as if she was never my girlfriend in the first place!

I lightly chuckled to myself before a terrible realization set in. Girlfriend? I hadn't had a girlfriend in two years! **Who the hell was this woman?!**

A sudden jolt of pain went through my head. It forced me to my knees as I clawed at my hair, screaming at the top of my lungs as the terrible sensation thundered through my brain.

“The fuck?” whispered Jeff, staring at me with confusion. “You think I broke him?”

A deluge of contradicting memories began to flow into my head, the two streams connecting violently. I saw two men, both young adults, trying to carve out meager existences in a harsh world. Yet they had different parents, different homes, different lives. As the flood of their experiences finally began to settle, I was left with one question. Which one of them was *I*?

“Seriously Mike, you’re embarrassing yourself now,” scoffed Elaine. “Just shut up and leave.”

Mike? That was the name of the first man. I was Mike… no. I wasn’t. My name was Chuck Bachman, a 19 year old professional failure from Oregon. I lowered my hands from my head and carefully regarded the open palms. Pasty white skin, wool sweater, and long fingernails. All unfamiliar qualities. I knew three things at that moment: this wasn’t my home, that wasn’t my girlfriend, and this wasn’t my body. **This wasn’t my goddamn body!**

Before anyone could utter another word, the front door burst open and a couple in the throes of a violent makeout session ambled their way towards the bed, eyes closed and entirely unaware of the pair already occupying it.

Nobody said a word, especially the slack jawed Jeff, as the newcomers collided with him and they all tumbled onto the mattress. All four of its occupants let out a shriek, Jeff and the female newcomer even louder than the others.

“Stacy?! What are you doing?!” shouted the mulleted man. “Who the hell is this?!”

“Jeff?!” the woman shouted back. “I thought you were going to be out today!”

“I thought *you’d* be out!”

“Hey Jeff?” interrupted Elaine, grabbing onto as much of the now-pinned bedsheet as she could. “Who’s this?”

“My girlfriend,” replied Jeff.

“I can’t believe you, Jeff! Why would you cheat on me like this?!” shouted Stacy, tears beginning to streak down her eyes.

“Me?! Who the hell is this guy, then?”

“He’s… he’s… your replacement. For cheating on me!”

“But you didn’t even know I was sleeping with Elaine until now!”

As the two continued their bickering while their respective “partners” stared on in silence, I slowly picked myself up and regarded the whole ordeal with a hazy leer.

“What the fuck?” was all I could let out in a whisper. Not even my parents’ soap operas had plots as insane as this! And honestly, I didn’t want any part in it.

A thought presented itself to me before I could make my exit; to go back to Elaine and beg her to come back to me. I froze and began to prod at my own brain to find where it had come from, because it sure as hell wasn’t something from *me*. It didn’t take long to find its source; Mike Smith.

The life and memories of the true owner of this body bubbled deep within me. But only just that; memories. There was no mind or consciousness connected to them. No soul. Just a database of everything the sorry bastard knew, all neatly packaged and ready to present his absolutely shit opinions nobody asked for.

If what was left of Mike was so eager to supply me with information, then maybe it could tell me what the hell was going on?

I closed my eyes and could see just that. I found myself in a flashback from just a minute ago, looking at an unfamiliar memory of me walking up a flight of stairs and slowly opening the front door to this very loft. I looked inside to see Jeff and Elaine going at it, the sight sending a cluster bomb of different emotions through my heart. And in response to the traumatic sight, I began unbuttoning my pants, reach my hand down my underwear, and-

Nope! I forcefully shook away the replay, trying my hardest not to let my face curl up in disgust. It was especially hard when I noticed my fly was still undone. After fixing that mistake and fastening my belt extra tight for good measure, I took a deep breath to calm myself down. Seriously, what kind of a fucking loser *was* this guy? And why did I feel so bad for him?

Well, he was actually complex. Resigned acceptance was one of the other feelings I could glean from the flashback. The man somehow thought that what was happening here was completely normal, and that men like him existed to either please a woman's ego or her sexual appetite. It wouldn't take a psychologist to figure out that Mike considered himself the former, but it *would* take one to understand why the hell he thought something as ridiculous as that.

But to be honest, whatever Mike's problem was, it wasn't mine. In fact, most of the problems from my old life were no longer mine either, judging from how healthy this body was. I'd still have to figure out what the hell was going on before I could consider what to do, but I knew where to start. And it wasn't here. Not for me, not for Mike.

As I looked up at the others in the room to tell them all to pound sand, I was met with an even more insane sight than before.

The group had quieted down, their shrill screeches now replaced with the sounds of suction and moaning. The newer couple had taken off all of their clothes and the four of them writhed together in an undulating mass of flesh.

"Yo, what the ***fuck***?" The words escaped my lips almost instinctively as I witnessed the double adultery confrontation somehow devolve into an orgy. How horny *were* these people?! You know what? I didn't care. I didn't want any part of this.

"Hey Elaine," I shouted from across the room.

"If you want any part of this, you'll have to beg," she replied.

Mike didn't have a humiliation fetish, his memories helpfully told me, making this easier than it already was. "Nah, I'm breaking up

with you."

"What?!" she screamed back, freezing in place as the others continued without her.

"Yeah! You treat me like shit, and have the nerve to ask *me* to beg to be fucked by the guy you're cheating me on with? Life isn't a fucking porno, and even if it were, you'd be the kind of star who'd wash out as a heroin junkie working a truck stop bathroom after a few years. You're honestly not worth it, and probably deserve a prick like Jeff. Have fun with him, for ever long that lasts!"

"Hey, fuck you!" shouted Jeff, unlocking his lips from Stacy's long enough to glare me down.

"That's the point, dumbass! I don't *want* to join your stupid orgy! So peace out, assholes!"

I turned around without another word as the two screamed obscenities, making my way to the front door and slamming it closed with a kick.

Now that that was over, it was time to focus on the important question. What the ever-loving *hell* was going on?!

[Level Up! (1)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +0 | End: +0 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +1]

[Str: 10 | Con: 10 | End: 10 | Cha: 11 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 10 | Int: 11]

[Skill Obtained! Detect Cheating (lv 1)]

No seriously, what the ever-loving ***fuck*** was going on?!

Chapter 2: A perfectly calm and normal commute

I tripped on the way out of Jeff's loft, landing face-first into the railing overlooking the parking lot two stories down. It was an absolute miracle the rusted metal didn't break and let me fall to my death. But could you really blame me for that fumble with the kind of day I'd been having?

I caught a girl cheating on me, and right after that, I realized I woke up in a new body! Technically she wasn't *my* girlfriend, per-se. That dishonor belonged to Mike Smith, the previous owner of this body. But that didn't make the situation any better! I wasn't in my own goddamn body anymore!

I picked myself up with a painful groan and made my descent down to the lot below. A very slow descent. Who knew what the hell was going on, but the first logical step was to figure it out. I reached into my pocket in search of a phone, but all I found was Mike's wallet and keys. Not even a dumb phone!

Back in the loft, I was somehow able to access Mike Smith's memories. I squirmed as I tried to repeat the process, poking and prodding every corner of my brain in hopes of finding the right switch, probably looking like a giant idiot to anyone who was watching. Which was hopefully no one. I was starting to get a headache.

Eventually, I hit just the right mental button, and… nothing. My headache started to grow a little worse.

I took a deep breath and kept walking. I still needed to find Mike's car, so I tried it again. This time, it didn't take as long for me to find the switch, and my head didn't even hurt as much afterwards! Oh yeah, and I actually got a result.

I walked past several cars to a rustbucket of an Oldsmobile. Paint was flaking off all over and the left-side mirror was severely bent out of shape. One of the doors was even a different color from the rest. Still, I felt a weird sense of nostalgia that wasn't my own as I looked at the jury-rigged scrap heap, so this had to be it. Mike's beloved car.

The vehicle was definitely ancient, since they didn't even make Oldsmobiles anymore. It even had a stick shift! One more trawl through my mind, this time without much trouble, and I was able to draw upon Mike's muscle memory. It took over for me and began to operate the dinosaur, driving it onto the road towards anywhere but here.

The neighborhood was completely unfamiliar, the roads and landmarks all unrecognizable. It wouldn't have surprised me if the body I ended up in was far from home, but how far away were we talking about? According to Mike, I was in… Newark, New Jersey?!

I steadied the wheel just in time to avoid swerving into the car beside me. The driver violently honked their horn while shaking their fist, while I just held my head down and let them get some distance. Starting a fight on the road was the last thing I needed now, especially when I was on the other side of the country.

That bit of info just brought up even more questions, and I still needed answers. It was time for Plan B. If there wasn't a smartphone on hand, then maybe a computer? I expected Mike to own something equally ancient, like one that still ran Windows 98, but his memories came up blank. Maybe he just didn't have any memories of using a computer? Could he really have been that sheltered?

Either way, it was time for plan C. If I couldn't find a smartphone or a computer, then I had to rely on one of the most classical repositories of knowledge around; the library.

One turn plus a gearshift later, the car was barreling down the highway. My heart rate began to slow back down, and the sound of rushing wind took my mind off the worst of this whole situation. I tried focusing on the billboards to distract myself further. There were the expected ads for accident attorneys, and a surprising amount for gentlemen's clubs. The Golden Rail, Poles to the Heavens, Exotic Birds. That last one had a picture of a flamingo on a stripper pole. The freeway was probably going over a bad part of town.

But the boards alongside them were what caught my eye. More attorneys, from medium-sized firms to small practices, trying to drum up business from passers by. Morgan and Jorgen, Mezzare Legal,

Wilson-Burton-Clide, and the list went on. But how likely was a driver going to use a highway billboard to find a *divorce lawyer*?

Maybe women didn't like their husbands going to all the strip clubs? I decided not to pay it too much mind.

A lot of weird shit was going on, and there was no point just staring. I had the memories of my body's previous owner, and hopefully it could give me better answers than just blankness.

"So, Mike Smith. What do you have to say about technology in general?" I asked out loud, eyes still focused on the road, not wanting to make the same mistake of underestimating the truth twice. "You don't own a laptop, smartphone, or even a basic cell phone! And you expect me to believe you don't know what any of those are? Fine, let's start with something simpler. Do you know what a telephone is? Those things are ancient. And if not, a fucking telegraph. A goddamn caveman would know what that is."

A mental image of a corded landline appeared in my head. Along with Mike Smith flirting with his now ex-girlfriend.

"Seriously dude, get over it!" I hissed. "I did you a favor by dumping her!" The chances anyone was actually listening in on the other end were slim, but it sure did feel like some part of Mike's personality was still around.

I let out a sigh, turning my head to the side as several cars overtook mine. Other Oldsmobiles, Fords, and Toyotas. There was even an Aston Martin in the mix. They all looked pretty old-timey, maybe there was some kind of car show going on? But why wasn't there anything more modern either? Not even a single Prius!

"Seriously, what year was this?" I whispered to myself. "Hold on, 19… 80?!"

I took a big gulp of air and held onto the steering wheel with a vice-like grip. It took all of my willpower not to drive through the overpass barrier out of shock and onto the road below. "Ok, easy does it Chuck. Don't slam on the accelerator, don't wrench the wheel, don't get yourself killed."

1980 wasn't so bad, right? This was living in America, I was white, and housing was cheap! I'd survive, probably even thrive! So why did it feel like I was about to have a heart attack? Oh, right. "**GODDAMN IT 19-FUCKING-80!**"

The oldsmobile skidded across the asphalt and slammed into the car in front of me.

The airbag quickly inflated, and my head went careening into it. The safety device broke the worst of the impact, and even if it hadn't, it would've at least woken me up from this fever dream.

I punched the airbag out of the way and slowly got out of my car. I read that you were supposed to wait until the paramedics arrived, but it really wasn't that big of a crash. The other vehicle was stopped a little away from mine and only had a large dent on its back fender. Neither me nor the other driver should've been too hurt.

"Hey buddy, are you alright?" I asked, slowly walking over to the driver-side door.

The door was thrown open by a leg and out stepped a man who was exactly five feet tall, partially balding, and beet red. He glared at me with his bloodshot eyes and opened his mouth wide to take a deep breath. He huffed several times before finally speaking.

"You asshole! Do you know how much that cost?!" A puff of steam escaped his nostrils as he breathed out.

"Shit, sorry man. I'm insured, they can pay it off." An image of paperwork sitting in my glove compartment flashed through my mind.

"Fuck you!" the man shouted as he charged at me.

Chapter 3: Road Rage

“Fuck you, asshole!” shouted the short, balding man as he charged at me.

He raised a fist that was aimed at my face, and threw it with all his might. I deftly stepped out of the way in time and his arm met nothing but air. He stumbled and turned towards me, teeth clenched and eyes filled with hatred, wanting nothing but my blood.

“You’re going to make me late for my appointment, just take the punch like a fucking man! Mezzare charges late fees!” He shouted again.

“Why don’t you just go to your appointment then?! I saw nothing!” I shouted back at him. The name he mentioned sounded familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. “Seriously, I’m having a really bad day too, so why don’t we *both* just fuck off?”

The balding man threw a flurry of wide punches. Avoiding the blows was simple with how he practically telegraphed the attacks. Jump to the left, move my head to the right, duck the wild haymaker. His fighting “style” was identical to people who weren’t sober, but he didn’t look or sound drunk. I’d seen plenty of people like that, and he wasn’t one of them.

My fists were raised the entire time and ready to intercept any blows I couldn’t entirely avoid. I was tempted to throw some punches of my own, but every time I had an opening, I got a better look at his face. There was something buried underneath the rage that threw me off. Something that made him look like he didn’t deserve it.

The man eventually put too much of his weight into his next swing, and as I dodged out of the way, he tripped on a small pothole and fell to the ground.

I winced at the sound of the impact. It was loud. I slowly approached him, my own fists still raised in case he was bluffing. But he wasn’t.

The man let out a long, drawn-out exhale, and with it, a sob. He

breathed in and continued to wheeze. It wasn't long before he'd broken out into tears and sniffles.

I slowly got closer. "H-hey, are you alright?"

He didn't react.

Against my better judgment, I knelt down and awkwardly placed a hand on his shoulder. I moved it up and down, trying to comfort the man.

"Why Selene, *why*?!" He mumbled.

Selene? Was that his girlfriend or wife? Suddenly, I recognized the other name he mentioned earlier.

"Oh shit, you're getting a divorce, aren't you?" I asked.

"Mhm," he sounded between sobs.

"Look, I might not know what that's like, but I just caught my girlfriend cheating on me. You maybe want to sit down on the side and talk about it while we wait for the highway patrol?"

The balding man raised his head and looked at me with even redder eyes. He slowly nodded and sniffed.

"Selene, I thought I loved her."

The two of us sat on the side of the road, waiting for the highway patrol to show up. Several cars slowed down as they drove by us. They ogled the strange duo, the snot-covered older man and the younger jittery one, and tried to piece together what had taken place. We didn't pay them any mind.

"Yeah, it's a horrible feeling, I know what it's like to lose someone you thought you loved," I said, arm wrapped around the man's shoulder. He told me his name was Irving. "What happened to you? I caught mine cheating on me red-handed."

"I found out she's a stripper," said Irving. "At the Golden Rail, I can't

believe it. I thought she was loyal to me."

I nodded along sympathetically, though my show didn't feel entirely honest. That wasn't really my girlfriend who I broke up with, it was Mike's. That raw, fresh emotion Irving was expressing wasn't there for me. But I could still sympathize.

"Seriously, I go in one day for my weekly lapdance and see her performing for a crowd, front and center! They were all throwing bills like she was *their* wife!"

I jerked my head towards Irving.

"Seriously, it was like she was some kind of animal, like she didn't have any shame!" Most of his sadness had disappeared and he was beginning to sound indignant.

"Uh huh." I slowly lifted my hand off of the man's back. "And what about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"How'd she feel about you coming in to get a lapdance?"

"Eh, she's also pushing for divorce, going with that other fancy firm that has a billboard right above the club. But how could she do this to *me*?!"

"Yeah, how could she?" I deadpanned while slowly nodding. My mouth was fixed in an awkward smile, and I didn't dare drop it. Just like Irving only wanted to get to his appointment as soon as possible, I wanted to get the hell out of there just as fast. Starting another fight wouldn't help.

Before Irving could continue his story, a faint siren broke the silence. It grew in volume until a police officer riding a motorcycle pulled up beside us.

"Oh thank god," I whispered.

"Now what happened here?" asked the officer, pulling off his helmet and looking at us with a curious look. He had a head of black hair

combed smooth and a handlebar mustache I could only describe as intimidating. “It looks like you two had quite a bit of an accident!”

“Yeah,” I said, getting up on my feet. “I’ve been having a really bad day and accidentally rear-ended him.” There was no point playing dumb when it really was my fault.

“No, it was me who was in the way,” said Irving, rising to join me. “I’ve also been having a horrible day.”

“Bad days, huh?” asked the cop. “What, did your girlfriend cheat on you? Or did your wife want to divorce you?” He let out a small chuckle.

“Yes,” we said in unison.

“Oh!” the officer’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, I know what it’s like too. I swear, it made me give up women for good! Well, I’ll write up the report and then you two can go.”

“Hold up, just like that?” I asked.

“Yup, just an accident caused by double relationship-related trauma,” the officer shrugged. “Pretty standard, actually. I’ll just write it in my report and your insurance should cover it without your premiums going up.”

“I think I can make my appointment on time if I go now, thanks officer!” shouted Irving as he jumped into his car and quickly drove away.

The sheriff let out a sigh. “I didn’t mean like that! I still need to see your license and registration. Man, he must be in a hurry!” He embellished his sentence with a dramatic eye roll.

“Yeah, he said he was going to meet with his lawyer. One of the ones there.” I pointed towards a collection of billboards in the distance.

“Mhm, that’d do it. How about you? Where’s a handsome man such as yourself headed to after losing your girlfriend?”

Whatever he was implying flew right over my head. “I’m going to the

library."

"Drowning yourself in books? Most people usually head to a bar! You're pretty responsible."

I let out a shiver. "Uh, thanks."

"No problem. You know, if books aren't enough, you should try *revenge*. You need to get back at that asshole who stole your girl by banging *his* girlfriend! That'll show him. Or just skip the middlewoman and fuck the cheater yourself!"

"Actually, he ended up catching his girlfriend cheating on him partway through the act," I dumbfoundedly replied. "So someone's already got me beat there."

"What goes around comes around. Well, if you're still looking for that sweet, sweet revenge, there's always option number two," the officer said as he gave me a wink. "But if you are in need of some company to cool off afterwards, here's my card. Give me a call and we can go out for drinks or something, maybe I can cheer you up? Here's my number"

My eyes opened wide in realization. I nervously nodded my head once more as I accepted a slip of paper from the officer. What else was I supposed to do?

"Thanks?" I said again, this time much more awkwardly.

"Don't mention it! But I'm only free on weekdays, I head down to Atlantic City on weekends to visit my family. So I'll be catching you later, stud."

After going back to my car to give the officer my license and registration, he walked back to his own ride and drove off, leaving me on the side of the road.

I slowly made my way back to the car and sat still for several seconds with my hands placed around the steering wheel in a vice-like grip. When I finally turned the vehicle on, I noticed a deep indent on the wheel's leather. There wasn't anything like that before.

I let out a long sigh as I drove towards my destination. “Whatever the fuck that was, at least it was better than getting shot.”

Chapter 4: The most rational course of action for a transmigrated protagonist

The last half hour of my existence could be summarized with a single question: “Why?” Or more accurately, “What the fuck?!”

I drove off the highway and down the local roads until Mike’s memories led me to my destination. A large building stood over the expansive parking lot I pulled into, casting its protective shade over the cars under its aegis, defending them from the afternoon summer sun. I found a particularly cozy spot underneath a vibrant oak tree, and made my way towards the front entrance.

In front of me was a staple of American culture, more so than cheap fast food or tons of guns. Before the internet was around, people would come *here* to find the answer to their questions, no matter how important or inconsequential.

The nostalgic smell of old paper hit my nostrils as I entered the library. The three storey building was decorated with a colorful carpet and soft overhead lights, bright enough to illuminate the entire space, yet not harsh enough to hurt the eyes. The foyer was almost entirely empty, with just a pair of patrons making their way out with a couple of books each.

There was no librarian in sight, and no sign of where I could find one. Mike Smith never spent much time here despite owning a card, so his memories came up blank when it came to navigating the sprawling building.

I made my way into the nearest set of shelves making up the romance section, expecting to find a sign at the other end. That had been 10 minutes ago.

I began to increase my pace, gradually at first, then frantically when I realized I’d passed the same shelf at least three times.

On my fifth pass, I stopped. Taking a deep breath, I let out most of my frustration with a slow exhale. It wouldn’t do me well to get kicked out for turning the shelves into dominos in a desperate call for

help, at least before I got my answers.

Out of curiosity, I walked over to the shelf and eyed the titles printed on the spines. And as anyone would expect, just about every single one of them sounded like some kind of schlocky smut. No wait, this was a public library full of children. Why would *anyone* expect something like that here?

Some of the titles included “Boys will be Boyfriends,” “Anaheim Forbidden Lust,” and “Picking Between my Secret Boyfriend and Girlfriend.” They sounded out of place for 1980s America, let alone a library.

Out of curiosity, I reached out for the books to read the synopsis, and I immediately regretted it. The book was wet. And when I pulled my hand away, it came with a slimy residue coupled with a pungent odor. That definitely wasn’t water. Oh god.

In a fit of utter horror, I bolted into a mad sprint, intent to find a bathroom or die trying. My right hand was extended far in front of me. I was going to keep it as far away from the rest of my body as possible, anyone who got in my way be damned.

By some miracle, I found a restroom after only half a minute, but it was locked. A sign was taped to the door, informing patrons to ask a librarian for a key. Just my fucking luck.

By another miracle, I was eventually able to escape the romance section the way I came in and headed to the second floor. The first thing in view was a librarian sitting at a large, wooden table supporting a massive rolodex. The giant roll of paper cards was flipped open to the front as the woman idly searched through the archaic device.

The librarian in question was a walking stereotype in her appearance. She had shoulder-length brown hair partially tied in a neat bun, and wore a pair of thick, wire-rimmed spectacles that matched her gray turtleneck sweater perfectly.

I casually made my way to her with a sigh of relief, glad that my current nightmare was about to end.

“Hello sir, how can I help you?” she asked, flashing me a deep, friendly smile. No doubt happy for the interruption from the monotony.

“Yeah, I’d like to use the bathroom please. Apparently I need a key.”

“Right, so is that for number one or number two?”

“Excuse me?”

“What are you going to do in there? Number one or number two? Or number three?” She finished with a whisper.

“Uh, I just want to wash my hands. One of the books in the romance section had… something on it that I accidentally touched.”

“And that’s why the bathrooms are locked in the first place,” the librarian said with a giggle. The action, combined with how tightly her sweater was drawn around her figure, caused the librarian’s body to visibly jiggle underneath it. “We also have a time limit for anyone who takes a key, as an extra precaution.”

“Well, I don’t really need much time there, so could I just get the key?” I asked, forcing myself to keep eye contact.

“Are you sure you won’t need more? I could always extend your time limit if you let me tag along.”

“No, I just need to wash my hands. It really shouldn’t take that long,” I said with a nod and polite smile.

The librarian held out the key on an open palm, the smile on her face quickly turning into a frown accompanied by an eyeroll. I quickly grabbed the key with my left hand and turned around.

Before making it more than a few steps, I faced back towards the woman and asked, “by the way, does the phrase ‘level up’ mean anything to you?”

“Sounds like the System fairy tale,” she replied boredly. “There should be some books in the children’s section, in the same direction as the bathroom on this floor. You’d probably fit in well there.”

“Alright, thanks!” I said before running off to the bathroom.

It didn’t take me long to find what I was looking for this time, on account of most of the nearby shelves only being waist high. Getting my hands clean freed me from the worst of the desperation that clouded my mind, allowing me to start thinking straight again. And the first free thought of the hour was how the librarian had acted. I could’ve sworn, it really sounded like she was flirting with me and was disappointed that I didn’t reciprocate.

But that entire scene felt way too off, and I wasn’t about to get kicked out for sexually harassing some poor librarian. I mean, what I saw was just my imagination, right? Right?

Chapter 5: American History XXX

After returning the key to the still disappointed-looking librarian, I made my way to the children's section in search of anything about this "System fairy tale." I'd never heard of a story like that before in my life, and the entire thing sounded like something out of a video game.

But it wasn't like the people here *had* video games, on account of there not being any computers. Though that could've just been Mike Smith having a technologically sheltered upbringing, but that didn't explain the librarian's rolodex. I was pretty sure libraries kept track of their catalog digitally, even way back when.

As I stacked several of the thick, educational tomes into a pile, I wondered why I'd never actually heard anything about this so-called "System" before. Even if it was some kind of niche pop culture trend that only existed for a short amount of time, it should've at least been mentioned once online as part of some kind of nostalgia bait discussion.

If anything, it sounded like a series of children's books based on some old RPG, most likely a tabletop one. But then why would the librarian call it a fairy tale? That implied it was ancient. If that was the case, I had a couple of theories floating around. One of them involved time travel.

I remember reading that tons of progress on computers and computation in general were made during World War II, so maybe the lack of computers was the result of someone going back in time and killing Hitler? And that was the first thing any time traveler would do. And maybe this whole "System fairy tale" and body swapping thing had something to do with the result of that?

Yeah, it was a massive stretch, and maybe it'd be good to get some basic information before coming up with something so batshit insane?

I made my way to the nearest desk, and settled down into a plastic chair that barely reached above the ground. My legs were bent at an

uncomfortable angle, and my knees rose above the height of the table. Well, that was what I got for stopping in the children's section.

I didn't let the rainbow quilt-colored carpet and bright plastic furniture faze me in my quest for knowledge. I took the first of the books and flipped through its thick, cardboard pages.

"System Tales: Chad the Conqueror," I read aloud. "By Bone R. Sheathe. Alright, this has to be a fucking joke or something."

One of the nearby patrons gave me a dirty glare, covering her son's ears as she led him away. I ignored them.

"Once there was a man named Chad," I began, speaking in a sarcastic mumble-whisper. "Nobody liked him because he was weak and unattractive. Chad was very sad because he could not find someone to love him."

Yup, it totally sounded like it was written for children, alright. If Bone R. Sheathe was Don Bluth's pen name.

"One day, the Lord of Words took pity on Chad and bestowed him with the System. He told Chad that it was a way for him to become strong and loved. If he practiced what he wanted to do every day, he would get better at it. To know how well he was doing, Chad would only have to say the magic words, 'Open System.'"

Immediately, a floating semi-transparent panel filled my field of vision. I reeled back in surprise, far enough that the miniscule chair I sat in tipped over and sent me to the floor with a soft crash. Rubbing my head, I got back up and uprighted my previous seat. It took only a moment to decide that the floor would've been safer, and I plopped my rear down there instead.

I turned my attention back to the mass of information slapped over my face. It was covered in a series of words and numbers, all neatly organized in tables. It didn't take long for me to figure out how to navigate the strange menu, all I needed was a quick series of eye flicks.

Name

Chuck Bachman (Mike Smith)	
Attribute	**Description**
Strength	Your physical strength, ability to hit harder and lift more.
Constitution	How much physical damage you can endure, be it from injuries or disease.
Endurance	Your physical Endurance. Also applies to your refractory period.
Charisma	Your ability to convince others with your words, both spoken and written.
Attractiveness	Your physical attractiveness, how receptive others are to your presence and words. Works in tandem with charisma.
Dexterity	Your physical dexterity. Applies to movement speed, fine motor skills, and how finely a target's nerves can be stimulated.
Intelligence	Your ability to recall previously learned or observed information, and how quickly new information can be learned.
Skill	**Description**
Detect Cheating	The ability to detect if someone around you is cheating. Will alert you if the act of cheating is actively occurring nearby.

Yup, that was me alright. Chuck Bachman, *not* Mike Smith. And those numbers matched what flashed in my head on the way over. I had a good idea what the rest of it was all about, but I decided to consult the "instructional texts" in front of me anyway.

"The Lord of Words told Chad that his abilities would be given numbers, and whenever he practiced an ability enough, the number would go up! And when Chad tried new things, he would be given a new number for that Skill."

That explained the level up and the [Detect Cheating] Skill. They popped up as soon as I left Jeff's place, and the numbers that went up, Charisma and Intelligence, kind of relate to what I did by catching them and telling them to fuck off.

I turned the page and continued reading.

"Chad practiced every day, and his numbers went up very high! They all started at ten which meant he was not special in anything. Soon they all went up to twenty, which is as good as the best of the best."

So that was how the numbers mapped to actual ability; 10 was average, 20 was peak human like with Einstein or Michael Phelps. It

was probably a miracle the System didn't start me off at level 5 or 7 in everything, that would've been more accurate. Eh, I'd take it.

"Chad discovered many new Skills and got their numbers up really high. He had Lying, Seduction, Pregnancy Induction…"

I put the book down and began looking around. Was there some kind of hidden camera somewhere? Was a TV crew going to jump out and tell me I've been Juiced? Or maybe this was one of those fake kid's books where they'd make a ton of sexual innuendos with big text and childish cartoon characters.

Except there were no innuendos here. The publisher was the same as the more tame children's stories next to it, and the book was put together without a single printing error. This thing was legit.

I quickly opened up a new book and began reading through it. It had a similar premise, and followed the same plot for the first 5 pages. Total loser got video game-styled super powers, grinded out their stats, and started doing some super pervy shit with it.

The third book followed the same formula. They were all written and sold by different authors *and* publishers, meaning this story definitely wasn't some kind of one-off thing. If something like this existed back home, people definitely would've been talking about it.

There was no denying it now; this wasn't the Earth I came from. Something big must've happened in the past that led to something *this* salacious being written for children.

I shot out of my seat and briskly walked towards the nearby history section, grabbing several US and world history textbooks before making my way to a much larger table. As I sat down, I noticed a man unlocking the door of the bathroom I'd used earlier. He was being followed by the librarian. I looked away from the two and got started on my books.

Fifteen minutes later, I slammed the dense texts shut. Well, my worst fears were confirmed; this wasn't my Earth. Not by a longshot.

I looked back at the textbooks before me and let out a long, drawn-

out sigh. At first, everything started out normal enough, but too many major events were completely perverted from what I knew back home. Literally.

The French Revolution came about because King Louis XVI wouldn't stop using the declaration of Primo Noctis to have sex with everyones' wives.

World War 1 started because Gavrillo Princip, the man who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand out of a misguided sense of patriotism, only did so out of a broken heart because he and the Archduke were former lovers!

And the Cuban Missile Crisis didn't have *anything* to do with nukes here. Oh no, not at all. It was because JFK fucked Castro's wife! Yeah! Ok fine, from what I've read about the ex-president, that one sounded the most realistic. But still!

I heard the bathroom door open up and instinctively looked up. The patron I saw earlier walked out, with the librarian right behind him. Both of their hair was disheveled, and they each had extremely guilty looks on their faces. The man's hands were even fidgeting while he loudly mumbled something about late fees, and his bathroom key reflected light into my face. No wait, that wasn't the key. That was a ring. A wedding ring.

At that moment, it all made sense. Mike Smith's fucked up views on relationship dynamics, the insane world history, and the fact that every single person I'd met so far was incredibly horny? I really *was* stuck in a porno!

I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Then the realization hit me.

My cheeks turned bright red, forcing me to hide my face behind a book to keep anyone from seeing it. I was in a porno! With fucking super powers no less! I could have my way with any woman I wanted, just like the protagonists of those stories! I mean, I could just test it out, only a little. It *would* be fun, and that librarian was pretty cute…

The crimson drained from my face. I lowered the book to reveal a

pained gaze. No. I'd just gone through hell to barely drag myself out of one vice, I wasn't about to jump head-first into another. Besides, I still didn't have the full picture of this place or my new magic powers. I at least wanted to make sure the System wouldn't harm any would-be girlfriend, or expect me to harm her.

A chime echoed from a series of loudspeakers along with a recorded voice. "The library will be closing in fifteen minutes, please check out any books now."

I piled all of my books up and headed towards the counter. I'd just have to continue my research back at Mike's place.

Chapter 6: And it will COME! In a flood of pain!

So that was the truth of it. I was stuck on an alternate Earth straight out of a porno with RPG-like abilities, with all of the books here written on the subject telling me that the world was now my oyster. And I told that truth to go fuck itself.

I would be a liar if I said I didn't want any part of this. This 'System' and the near-limitless sex it promised me sounded tempting. Incredibly tempting! But I knew that giving in to one's vices won't bring true happiness. You'd keep doing it until there was nothing left besides it. Not again.

"One must cultivate one's own garden." That was the ideal that I lived by now; to find a purpose and continuously work on it. And nobody's purpose was to have stupid amounts of mindless sex, and no amount of shitty porn plots would convince me otherwise. Thanks Voltaire.

I took a detour on the way to the checkout counter to pick up a copy of "Candide" from the fiction section, before reaching my destination. I was helped by the same librarian as before, who looked much more content after finding someone to satisfy her. She was tearing up a series of late fines, even though there were others next to her that were simply marked as paid.

I ignored it and focused on my own books instead. Nodding thanks, I put the hodgepodge of history and children's texts in the provided plastic bag and made my way back to my car.

I stepped out of the library's front entrance and took a deep breath of fresh air. The setting sun reflected off the still fountain water. The wide concrete path led up to and around the decorative feature, with a pair of sprawling, grass lawns surrounding the walkway on either side. It was getting pretty late, and according to my stomach, it was also time for dinner.

Mike's memories informed me he rented a small apartment with a TV and freezer full of frozen meals. After the day I had, that and a good night's sleep sounded perfect. I didn't think I could deal with any

more surprises, otherwise I'd snap…

"Hey, jackass! We've got some unfinished business!" shouted a familiar voice.

For fuck's sake…

"So, you think you can disrespect my girl, do ya?! Huh, ya think you can get away with it?!" screamed Jeff, the man who I'd caught sleeping with Mike Smith's now ex-girlfriend. He appeared seemingly out of nowhere and by the time I turned around to face him him, he was already upon me. He wasted no more time with introductions by shoving me into a group of his lackeys.

Such fine gentlemen they were, catching me and holding me in place while the wannabe fuckboy strutted over. I tried wriggling out of their grip to no avail. Apparently that was the result of pitting 10 Strength against three guys.

"Last I checked, she was *my* girlfriend," I spat back.

"And you two had a deal! You buy Elaine shit I can't afford and she pretends to be your girlfriend!"

"What?!" Mike's memories on this supposed "deal" vehemently denied anything of the sort, insisting that he and Elaine were soulmates destined to be together. But the memories weren't exactly blank. "Seriously, WHAT?! You actually expect me to believe that? And whatever happened to poor old Stacy? Did you two break up after the orgy?"

"Fuck you, it's complicated!" Jeff screamed. "And of course a loser like you didn't get the hint. But you had to go and mess things up for her anyway."

"Well, consider me a new man," I smiled back. "Give her my apologies and my *formal* resignation from this deal." With everything that had happened today, such an agreement wouldn't have surprised me at all. But who did I choose to believe; an increasingly unreliable Mike Smith or *this* asshole?

"Well too fucking bad. For breaking Elaine's heart, I'm going to break

your face!”

Well, it wasn’t like my beliefs mattered anymore. Because Jeff chose to believe in violence.

I really wanted to stay out of trouble, but trouble sought me out. I was fine with being patient with people like Irving. I was the one who caused them trouble to begin with, I was the straw that broke the camel’s back, I could reap what I had sown. But Jeff? This idiocy was all him. And he was about to find out what I did to people who went out of their way to make trouble for me. He won’t ever be giving me a repeat performance.

As Jeff’s haymaker came flying towards my face, I simply stood in place and smiled. My lips began to part more and more, soon revealing a grin showing plenty of teeth, all frozen in a manic frenzy. My head turned to catch Jeff’s fist as it slid past my open mouth, making sure my left canine caught his skin, drawing a thick streak across his arm.

“God, what the fuck?!” the roided-out chimpanzee shouted as he tried to stop the bleeding with his shirt. “I thought you were a little bitch!”

I puckered my lips and began gathering saliva in my mouth. Once Jeff closed the distance with his left fist raised, I hocked a bloody loogie right into his face, causing him to flinch. That moment of hesitation from everyone around me was all I needed as I broke out of his lackeys’ grips, ran up to the walking steroids PSA, and smashed my forehead into his nose.

The man reeled back in pain, both hands grasped over his now profusely bleeding snout, while I simply stared at him with a manic grin. I’d given up my old life of looking for trouble, but trouble found me today. This was simply the natural result.

I charged at Jeff from the side, making use of the spit-induced blind spot to close the distance. He was too surprised to react, especially since I used my hands to grab and pin his arms in place as I wrapped my teeth around his left earlobe and bit as hard as I could.

He screamed in pain as I tore off a chunk of flesh and spit it onto his pristine white shoes. I only laughed like a maniac. His friends immediately dropped their guard and ran for Jeff, trying to avoid the blood spurting out of the wound as they carried him back to their car, probably to go to the hospital.

I simply stared at them as they ran from me, trying my hardest not to swallow any of Jeff's blood. Once they were gone, I walked over to a nearby water fountain by the library's entrance and rinsed out my mouth. With how much that dumbass was sleeping around, who knew what STDs he had? Especially if he was *this* hot headed and impulsive? Not like me, I was sensible enough to finish the fight before either of us got *really* hurt.

[Level Up! (2)]

[Str: +1 | Con: +1 | End: +0 | Cha: +2 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +1 | Int: +0]

[Str: 11 | Con: 11 | End: 10 | Cha: 13 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 11 | Int: 11]

[Skill Obtained! Revenge (lv 1)]

Wait, Revenge? I was just protecting myself! How the hell did that count as taking revenge?! You know what? Fuck it, I'd absolutely had enough of today.

Chapter 7: If plumbers don't do their jobs, who actually fixes the pipes?

The drive back home was thankfully uneventful. The twenty minutes on the open road let me simmer down, and the frozen dinner I ate when I arrived brought me back to my sanity. I munched on the freezer-burned turkey and dry mashed potatoes while sitting in front of the TV, thankful that the mind numbing entertainment distracted me from my mediocre meal. Most of the shows were ones my parents used to watch, and as far as I could tell, they were pretty much the same from back home… minus the sexual tension between the actors.

And I didn't mean the characters, I meant the actors themselves; they were all ready to find some privacy as soon as the cameras stopped rolling. Surprisingly, it made things more entertaining. I made a game out of finding out who was having sex with who based on how their acting changed between scenes. Usually the ones who looked the most constipated tended to mellow out in unison.

As the current block of shows ended, so did my meal. Despite how old the frozen dinner was, probably having been sold last Thanksgiving, it wasn't all that bad. It was at least filling. Of course, it didn't match up to a cup of instant ramen, but when in New Jersey, you make due with not starving. With my stomach filled, I was finally thinking clearly again.

I brought the bag of library books to a small table and took out the first one; a children's tale filled with thick, cardboard pages. If I wanted a better idea of how this world and so-called System worked, I'd have to read these things all the way through. The more information I had, the better. I didn't want to get caught in any hidden gotchas, like some kind of forced Skill activation or this "Lord of Words" showing up at my doorstep.

I froze in place, letting silence consume the apartment, and slowly craned my head towards the door, half expecting someone to knock on it. Just then, a shiver went down my spine as I heard someone walking away from just outside my curtained window.

“You know what? Fuck this,” I whispered to myself as I got out of my seat and headed towards the kitchen. I grabbed a box of salt, taking it to my front door and pouring a line across its width. There was some supernatural bullshit going on, and this was the go-to defense to supernatural bullshit according to a bunch of old stories. Beyond good nutrition, proper hygiene, and overall politeness, at least.

Finally feeling a little safer, I made my way back to the desk and opened up the book. I skimmed past the beginning, which consisted of a supposed nobody getting RPG-like superpowers and grinding out their stats to superhuman levels.

“Simon was a man who loved babies, because they are cute! He wanted the world to have more babies, so he set out to make as many as he could.”

I flipped the page, eyeing the cartoonish drawing of a baby. It was pretty standard, as baby drawings went, thankfully. What did that say about me if I had those kinds of expectations? I continued reading out loud.

“He made many women pregnant, and through the powers of the System, he was able to make more and more women pregnant more easily. They only had to touch his seed with their hands to do so. As time went on, even seeing him and feeling love would work!”

That was some biological warfare shit, right there. Imagine dropping some of that magical splooge into a town’s water supply? Everyone would get pregnant just by taking a shower! I had no idea how the hell this book was able to treat something like this so casually.

“Simon made so many babies, that they renamed his country after this accomplishment. It is now called Otroka, after the Slovenian word for children. It is a paradise for anyone who wishes to have babies and take care of them.”

Was Otroka an actual thing? I pulled open a history book from the bag and flipped through its pages until I found a section on the country. It *was* an actual thing apparently, and took the place of Slovenia when Yugoslavia broke up. Hold on, did that actually happen in 1950? I could’ve sworn it was much later back home. But

was it really caused by a System user here?

The very end of that chapter in the textbook had a line about it. “Local legends attribute Otroka’s founding to the System fairy tale, possibly as an explanation to the record-breaking fertility rates during the time period.”

I eyed the children’s book and sighed. Looked like it wasn’t actually a myth after all. I turned the thick, cardboard page and continued reading.

“Our hero brought babies to every woman in the country. In doing so, the Lord of Words wanted to thank him for making the world a much more interesting place. But before He could, Simon disappeared.”

And that was it. That was the last page. There was no epilogue, explanation on who this Lord of Words was, or what this so-called “thanks” or disappearance entailed.

I put the book back and pulled out another one. It started out the same as the last one, so I skipped ahead to where it diverged. “Our hero had always wanted a wife. Someone who would always love him and he could love back. But he couldn’t settle for just one. However, the System made him so beloved, everyone in his village wanted to be his wife!”

So he started a harem or something? Seemed pretty standard for a shitty harem romance anime. I had the displeasure of watching a few back in my previous life.

“But our hero did not know who to choose, so he left his village and traveled to a big city. However, everyone there wanted to be his wife as well! Every man was also jealous of him because nobody wanted to be with them anymore, but they soon came around and realized that they just wanted to be our hero’s husband, just like the women wanted to be his wife.”

Huh? Well, LGBT representation was definitely something I wasn’t expecting in a children’s book from 1980. Hold on. That cop from earlier was probably hitting on me, and a lot of those romance titles

at the library sounded anything *but* straight! It looked like the gay rights movement came to this world early.

I flipped open the history textbook again and found a chapter about it. The civil rights movement in this world took place in the 1920s instead of the 70s, and was spearheaded by both the black and LGBT communities. So that led to expanded rights for both of these groups, along with many others. Well that was nice to know, but it was still 1980 and I was more than happy to continue being a straight white man.

I turned back to the storybook and continued reading it aloud. "Seeing how captivating our hero was, the Lord of Words came to him and thanked him for bringing great want and desire to the world. The End."

Again? What was up with these stories ending so abruptly? It was probably just poor storytelling, or maybe that was just a theme with these System fairy tales. Maybe it was the fact that these books were written for little kids? But on the bright side, it didn't look like there were any major gotchas that could come along and bite me in the ass. Though the books never mentioned if those weird effects were toggleable. I didn't want to accidentally grab a Skill that would get me paying child support for half of a country. I can't even afford to support *myself*!

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. So… now what? As far as I could tell, I was stuck here for the foreseeable future, and I wasn't interested in playing the game set aside for me. But could I just live a normal life? I didn't even have to watch porn to know how the plot usually worked; someone tries to do their job, but gets distracted by somebody attractive, and… yeah.

Was that going to happen every time I tried to do my job? Would I even be able to do my job at all? How would anyone be able to do *anything* at that rate? The fact that my pipes weren't clogged and the refrigerator was running meant that *someone* was able to get their job done, otherwise we'd all be living like cavemen.

So there! Someone must've been keeping things running in the background. Tradespeople who actually got things fixed, scientists

and engineers who built devices to work without breaking, politicians and businessmen who could extort people out of *more* than just their bodies! Those were the kinds of people I had to find and emulate. Well, maybe not that last group.

And by the looks of things, I was already on my way to doing so, or rather, Mike was. He already had a job, one that I'd get back to tomorrow morning, in fact! At 8 am. On a Sunday. As a retail clerk at a clothing store. Oh god.

Chapter 8: Hell is Working Retail

7:30 am. I was awake, dressed up in my uniform, and ready to head out to work. I reached for the front door, but was interrupted by a soft rapping. On the other side was a somewhat older woman, probably in her late thirties or early forties, looking down on me with a polite smile.

“Well hi there, Mike!” she said amicably, her lips spread out in a soft smile. “Headed for work?”

“That’s right… Eunice,” I replied groggily, Mike’s memories stepping and filling me in on who she was. My landlady.

“Yeah, working Sunday mornings can be rough.” She looked towards the ground and scratched at her ever-so-slightly graying hair. “But I know you’re a hard worker, especially with your next rent payment coming up.”

Oh. Mike had spent most of what *would’ve* been his rent money on an expensive gift for Elaine, and now he was flat broke.

“But I know a young man like you has other priorities besides rent, so… if you ever have any trouble paying, feel free to talk to me, and I know we can work something out.” Eunice gave me a sheepish grin.

She was talking about sex, wasn’t she?

Her eyes slowly shifted down towards my chest, and then to my crotch.

Yeah, she was.

After Mike’s most recent series poor life choices, he was actually planning to take Eunice up on the offer, despite the attraction not being exactly mutual. In fact, according to his memories, he was planning to use that as justification for cheating on *his* girlfriend. It was a good thing Elaine beat him to the punch. Maybe those two *were* made for each other?

Well, I wasn’t made for Elaine. And while I personally didn’t mind

Eunice, who in my humble opinion aged like fine wine into a bonafide milf, I knew I wasn't going to get far in life paying my rent with sexual favors.

"You know, I really appreciate the offer," I said with a forced grin. "But I'm going to work extra hard to have the money ready for you."

"Well, ok then. But don't overdo it! Take care of yourself first! And… is that salt?" She looked down at the ground at the line of salt I'd drawn last night.

"Huh? Oh yeah, I think it is! I'm a pretty clumsy cook," I lied.

"You should be more careful, Mike. Spilling salt is an insult to the Lord of Words! Well, I'll be seeing you then!" Eunice gave me one last smile before turning around and heading back to her own apartment.

It took another few seconds for the coffee to finally hit me, at which point my eyes began to bug out. Lord of Words?! Fuck, was he actually real? Well, who else could've given me this System anyway? But if he doesn't like spilling salt, then drawing that line last night was probably a good move. Or more likely, if Eunice had the hots for me, that could've been her trying to check up on me back then.

Rather than ruminate on the unsettling information, I looked back at my wall clock and realized I was running late for work. I ran to my car and gunned it down the empty early morning streets to the mall.

The parking lot was equally empty, as most people didn't wake up this early to do their shopping on a weekend. The smell of asphalt and smog, along with my caffeine-addled brain, left me with a feeling of unease that I was certain would be prophetic. I found myself a nice spot and made my way into the middle-class boutique through the back entrance. It was just how Mike remembered it; musty smelling, poorly lit, and-

"Mike there you are!" shouted a gruff voice. It belonged to a pudgy, balding middle-aged man wearing a similar uniform, but with the addition of a lanyard indicating his seniority. It was the manager,

Judd Wheldon, my boss.

“Hey Judd,” I replied, still half-asleep despite the coffee. Maybe I actually drank too much, because a slight tingling sensation was forming in the back of my brain.

“That’s Mr. Wheldon, to you, Mike. I’m your boss, remember?”

I slowly nodded in response, choosing to play the role of a polite silent type to get this guy to fuck off as soon as possible. Only a slight departure from Mike’s usual sniveling yes-man attitude.

“What’s wrong there, Mike? Cat got your tongue? Hahaha!” His laugh at the end sounded more like a wheeze. The man took plenty of cigarette breaks whenever he had work.

“Sorry Mr. Wheldon, it’s just been a rough week for me is all,” I replied.

“Rough week? Don’t tell me it’s rough unless you caught your girlfriend cheating on you! Ha!” He let out the same wheezy laugh as before.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what happened,” I deadpanned.

“Oh, well that’s too bad,” he replied, sounding mildly sympathetic. “But that’s not going to get you a day off, so here’s the tag printer. We’ve got a sale going on and I need you to print out new price tags for all of the men’s shirts!”

I exhaled as I took the handheld machine and nodded, before making my way into the main floor and looking around for the exact section Judd was talking about. The tingling immediately subsided in my newfound solitude, but returned in an instant.

“Oh, hey Mike!” came a high-pitched voice from behind me. I turned around to face one of my other co-workers, Cathy. Catty Cathy, the 30-something year old with a plump face and neon dyed hair was known as the most lively out of the boutique’s employees. Well, lively in the sense that she loved to flirt and gossip. “So, whatcha up to?”

“Hi Cathy,” I responded, not paying her too much mind. “Judd’s got

me taking care of retagging the shirts over there for the sale."

"Hmm, that doesn't sound too hard," she replied animatedly. "Now restocking the blouses, that's hard! And mean ol' Judd's got me working on those."

"Mhm," I simply nodded in reply.

"How about if we switch, I'm sure you'll get the chance to talk to plenty of ladies who come your way there. It might get *you* hard," she said casually. "And if they don't, then maybe *I* will." She winked at me.

My eyes widened, but it was due to her directness rather than the offer itself. Too bad it hadn't even been two weeks since the last time she used that line on me. In fact, Cathy promptly dismissed Mike when he tried cashing it in then.

"Sorry, not today," I replied, cutting her off as I made my way to the shirts. I was sure I received a piercing glare in response, but I didn't let it bother me. I had a job to do after all, and a garden to cultivate.

The task went by smoothly, as I just had to press the same button repeatedly and put the resulting sticker on each shirt lining the white-painted wooden shelf. It wasn't glamorous work, but it let me focus my mind and brush off the worst of my residual sleepiness.

That focus didn't last long. I was interrupted halfway through by an unassuming man demanding I tell him where the changing rooms were. His presence once again caused the tingling to surge, but I didn't let it bother me, despite its greater strength. Was I just allergic to other people or something?

Pushing the thought aside, I used Mike's memories to point him in the right direction and sent him on his giddy way. I guessed some people just really liked buying new clothes? I never really understood it myself, preferring to keep my old T-shirts for as long as they had more material than holes in them.

"You know you should be more attentive to customers like me," the man said in a huff. "Be lucky I don't report you to your manager!"

Or maybe I was just allergic to assholes? At last he was gone now.

As I finished my task, I was approached by another employee, a 25 year old man named Andre. He was accompanied by another mental tingle. Andre had curly black hair and tanned skin, and according to Mike, a bit of a “complex.”

“Mike, I see you’re re-tagging the shirts,” he said, leaning on the nearby wall with a cocky grin.

“That’s right, Andre,” I replied with the same plainness I’d used with Cathy.

“You know, the sale applies to *all* shirts,” he said, lifting his nose up at me. “So you should take care of the ones over there too.” He pointed towards another shelf in the distance.

“Well that’s not what Judd said.”

“As someone who’s going to be assistant manager soon, you’d better do as I say if you still want to have a job,” said Andre, narrowing his eyes. “And the next corporate inspection is coming up, so I don’t want you making me look bad. Especially in front of Charlotte when she gets here!”

“Well for now, you’re just another clerk like me, Andre, so no. I don’t think I will.” I returned his glare with my own icy gaze.

The man immediately took a step back in surprise, never having seen that side of Mike Smith before. *All* of Mike Smith was now a new side. Thankfully, Andre’s megalomania didn’t cloud him from the malice in my own expression. He made the right decision in backing off.

I think I was beginning to understand why people hated working retail. Well, half the reason.

I finished the price tags and headed towards the back to get my next set of instructions. I would’ve taken a break first, but without a smartphone, I’d just be staring at the sky or something else boring. Another monotonous task could at least give me a chance to zone out and make time pass by faster.

As I passed by the changing rooms, I was hailed by that annoying sensation again, this time more forceful than any time before. It definitely wasn't a headache, but I still tried my best to push it down. I was doing a pretty good job too, until I heard moaning.

"God fucking dammit."

Chapter 9: Employee of the Month

I slowly craned my head and narrowed my eyes as I slowly shuffled my way towards the source of the sound. My head was throbbing in sync with the moans coming from the changing rooms.

While I would've loved to leave the lovebirds to their business, whatever mess they ended up making would be on *my* head to clean up! And that made it my business!

"Hey, assholes! Find a room that *I* don't have to clean up afterwards! You've got cars, dontcha?!" I shouted while violently slamming my fist into the cheap plywood door.

"Oh shit!" whispered a voice from inside. I recognized it as belonging to the customer I'd given directions to earlier. That was probably why he was so excited about 'shopping'.

"If you two 'finish up' first, I swear I'm going to grab whatever spunk you leave behind with my bare hands and throw it at you! And I'll be aiming for your mouth!" God, I hope that didn't come off as kinky to them. I had **no** intention of following through with that threat.

Luckily, I didn't have to. Within a few seconds, the door unlocked and out walked the unfortunate couple, the man from before with a woman I didn't know. As they passed me, the sensation in my mind reached a crescendo.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 1 -> 2]

The words flashed in my vision, forcing me to take a step back in surprise.

Oh, so *that* must've been what that feeling was. I was thankful for it not being something like a migraine or an aneurysm, but it still didn't make it any less annoying.

With that mystery out of the way, I took a quick peek inside the changing room and confirmed that it was clean, save for a few neatly folded articles of clothing placed on a bench. I sighed in relief at

stopping trouble before it started and was greeted with an entirely different surprise.

“Mike! What the hell are you doing?!” shouted Judd from behind me.

“Stopping a mess before it happened.”

“Why did you do that to our best customer? She comes here several times a week to buy clothes and you just chased her away!”

“She was having sex in the changing room!” I replied indignantly. “Was I just supposed to let her continue?”

“Yes!” he shouted back, not entirely making eye contact. ”She uses this place for her rendezvous, and it’s a different guy every time who always buys her something expensive when they mess their own clothes up.”

I leered at his response, [Detect Cheating] going off even harder all of a sudden. Wait… “You want to be one of those rendezvous partners! And I just ruined those chances for you, didn’t I?”

“I… what?! I’ll have you know I’m married, Mike!” he exclaimed, lifting up his hand to show a gold wedding band. That didn’t stop the strong red blush from covering his cheeks or the stutter in his voice. Yeah, sure buddy. Sure.

“Mr. Wheldon, I finished taking stock of the returns. I heard screaming, is everything alright?” asked Trisha, another employee. Unlike the others, she was only 16 years old, and as far as Mike could tell, much more innocent. I believed it too, seeing as how I didn’t feel that same sensation when she showed up. That was a first for today.

“Oh, Trisha,” replied Judd, eyeing the girl intently. “Just take over at the register, the early rush should be starting soon.”

“Alright, I’ll get on that now!” she replied cheerily as she walked away.

Judd kept his gaze focused on her, which I would’ve normally dismissed, but with how his eyes lingered downwards and how he licked his lips with that smile…

“She’s sixteen, you know,” I replied disgustedly.

“And legal in a few months,” he replied back.

I stared at him dumbfounded. People said working retail was hell, and now I knew why. The droning feeling in my mind was starting to take its toll, and combined with the experience I’d had today, I was done. After taking a long, drawn out breath, I turned around and began walking.

“Hey, where are you going?” asked Judd.

“You’ll see!” I replied cheerily. My giddy smile only gave a glimpse of the manic energy flowing through me. It was time I turned in my resignation in a way that would make Judd think twice about pulling the same stunt again.

It wasn’t long before I was interrupted once more.

“Hey Mike,” came a familiar voice as I was headed to the main till. I turned to see Cathy calling me over alongside Andre. The two were close enough to be touching shoulders, and [Detect Cheating] went off again. “We need to talk.”

“We’ve been talking, and you’ve changed,” added Andre.

“For the worse,” concluded Cathy.

“What’s up?” I asked, mildly annoyed.

“You’ve been acting up today and treating us pretty badly, so we decided to let you know,” replied Cathy, grabbing Andre’s hand as a symbol of their solidarity against me. Or was it that they were *together* now? Who even cared at this point?

“And the first step of that is to get you to start back on the right path, and that means doing what we told you to earlier today,” said Andre, now with a firm glare.

“Start tagging the other sets of shirts and restocking the blouses, or we’re going to tell Judd that you aren’t being a team player,” concluded Cathy.

I stared at the two dumbly. After standing up for myself as Mike Smith, this was how they decided to respond. With blackmail. You know what? This just made what I was about to do even more fun!

Time for some scorched Earth, motherfuckers!

“Alright, sure! But first, let me just take care of one more thing,” I said, as I continued towards the register.

I reached the intercom unmolested and cranked the volume high enough to broadcast throughout the entire store, and hopefully into the mall outside. The initial static and feedback of the electronic setup got everyone’s attention, and my co-workers walked over towards me with curiosity.

Scorched Earth, motherfuckers.

Chapter 10: Two Second's Notice

"Attention, shoppers," I spoke into the microphone with my most charismatic newscaster voice. "I'd like to announce a huge sale on not being a total piece of shit! For the low, low price of absolutely free, you can get yourselves some morals! Of course, this is mostly aimed at our employees."

Everyone around me flinched. Too bad for them, it was only going to get worse.

"Cathy, if you're not going to deliver on your promises, why make them at all? I don't blame you for not paying up with the kinds of deals you make, but don't expect it to work more than once on the same person. So Andre, try to keep that in mind for next time!"

Cathy's mouth dropped while Andre looked towards her with suspicion. While he whispered a battery of questions, I didn't give Cathy a chance to answer back.

"And you Andre, you aren't completely innocent yourself! You think you're hot shit with how 'you're going to be assistant manager' this and how 'everyone should preemptively listen to you' that."

I wracked my brain and Mike's memories for any potential dirt on Andre as he gave me a baleful look.

"And your so-called plan to become assistant manager? It's pretty pathetic seeing you try to seduce Charlotte from corporate whenever she comes by so you can jump the ladder. She isn't into you, dude! And why would she be? Nobody with status like that is going to want to even *touch* you if you're going to act like you're already their boss! Confidence is hot, but arrogance is not."

While the two continued to process how their submissive coworker finally grew an adamantine backbone, Judd finally made his way from the changing rooms with an utterly enraged aura.

"Oh, and how could I forget about our good old boss, Judd? Oh, I'm sorry. I mean Mr. Wheldon. Who's apparently so desperate for some

poon that he's willing to let the biggest gold digger I've ever met fuck a different guy in the changing rooms several times a week in hopes that he could be one of them! Did I mention that us lowly employees are the ones who have to clean up everything? And if that weren't enough, you still have to stare at literal teenagers! And that means you, Trish."

The girl who was just passing by froze in place and turned to look at me. Her doe-like eyes were wide with fear, and close to misting up.

"You, Trish, are probably the only decent person around here. I just wanted to let you know that you're better than all the others, and if 'Mister Wheldon' tries to proposition you, you can say no. You're worth more than that, and you should wait for someone who also realizes that. Someone who won't cheat on you and you won't want to cheat on yourself."

She slowly nodded, no longer scared but hosting a look of apprehension. I didn't blame her, a kid being drawn into this legendary stunt. But that was the great part about all of this, it was Mike Smith pulling it, not me. And while he might've freaked out about cleaning up the mess featuring the colorful cast of his life, I really didn't care. The people from my life were gone, back home, while I was here and able to start anew.

I jumped over the counter and made my way to my now ex-boss. Wow, I was leaving a pile of exes in my wake. I wondered what kind of ex would be next?

"So, now that I've turned in my resignation effective immediately, I'm going to need my last paycheck."

"Paycheck?" he fumed between gritted teeth. "After that stunt, you're lucky I don't call the cops! Now get the fuck out of my store, and don't expect a penny from me!"

I was about to shrug my shoulders and leave, having accomplished what I wanted, but something stopped me. [Detect Cheating] went off again, this time stronger than ever and with a hint of something else alongside it. What was going on? It wasn't like he was actively cheating on his wife right now by being a cheapskate, or… then it hit

me.

“I don’t know, Judd, I’d love to walk out of here now and give you a chance to heal from hearing the truth.” I replied mockingly. My gaze then turned ice-cold as I looked right into his pupils. “But then I’ll have to call the labor board and have them pick up my last paycheck for me.”

Judd froze, his jaws locked so hard he couldn’t get anything out.

“And I’m sure they’d like that, as well as any other dirty secrets they might find. And knowing you, I’m sure there are plenty,” I said with a devilish grin.

“F-Fine. I’ll get it for you from the back,” he stuttered as he slowly made his way there.

I followed him, as I was headed there anyway. He quickly scribbled the company information onto a paycheck form and handed it to me.

“Oh hey, look at that! A full two weeks! Didn’t the pay period just start though?” I asked teasingly.

“Consider that a bonus for not going to the labor board,” he replied in a hoarse whisper.

“Well I guess you can be generous, after all. Thanks again, and see you never!”

I exited the store and made my way to my car. What an interesting morning that was. I went to my job, got shat on, retaliated and quit, and now…

[Level Up! (3)]

[Str: +1 | Con: +1 | End: +1 | Cha: +2 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +1 | Int: +1]

[Str: 12 | Con: 12 | End: 11 | Cha: 15 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 12 | Int: 12]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 1 -> 2]

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 2 -> 3]

[Detect Cheating Perk Obtained! Information: Cheater]

I leveled up! The third one so far, and there was a lot to unpack. Way more of my attributes increased this time, probably because I was doing more things. Like tedious labor, stomaching everyone's shit, telling people off, and realizing that Judd was trying to fuck me over with my pay.

Charisma had gone up by 2 instead of just one. I guess the more impressive things I said, the higher that number would increase. Well, I did feel a lot more glib than when I was airing everyone's dirty laundry over the intercom, I guess it really was having an effect on me.

I hadn't had much of a chance to test the other Skills, but I honestly didn't see why it was worth even bothering with for now. It wasn't like I was going on some grand quest to save, or fuck, a princess or anything. I didn't need most of those things to get through daily life.

And then there was the level up in Detect Cheating, along with the 'Perk' it came with. "Open System."

Chapter 11: Collecting Unemployment

I rode the high from my legendary stunt all the way back to my apartment, my car windows pulled down so I could feel the wind in my face, the midday air smelling of ozone and victory. Parking my car in my designated spot, I strutted to my front door, twirling a keychain on my finger. I was king of the world, the baddest motherfucker there ever was! Until I was interrupted by a soft hand lightly tapping my shoulder.

“Mike! You’re back home early!” came a cheerful voice.

My body froze stiff as I slowly craned my head to see who it was. “H-hey Eunice.”

“Did your boss give you the day off? I know you’re such a hard worker and deserve it.” She looked at me intently, and I immediately knew what she wanted. But her expression was mixed with apprehension and embarrassment, like she didn’t *want* to have to be asking me.

I felt a crack in my confidence. Her slightly aging face broke at it further, and the way her smile genuinely reached her eyes made me reach into my pocket and slowly pull out my last paycheck. I handed it to my landlady.

“Perfect, this should let you catch up on the last two months of rent! Thank you so much, Mike.”

“Yeah, no prob- wait, two months?”

“That’s right, you’ve been behind on rent for two months, so this check should cover it all perfectly! And don’t worry, I can cash it in for you so you don’t have to worry about going to the bank!”

“Uh yeah… thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, sweetheart,” she said with one more warm smile and a deep sigh of relief before turning around and heading for her own apartment.

I didn't have the heart to follow her or say anything else. She looked *too* happy to get the check for me to want to take it away from her.

"Oh by the way," she said, turning around. "There's also your utility bills. You've been pretty far behind those as well, but I'm not in charge of those. I just hope the company will also be patient and give you enough time to pay them back too."

I nodded back in response. Without another word, I slowly dragged myself towards my apartment without another thought in my head. Only when I was finally inside, I slammed the door and let out a minute-long held breath.

The storybooks from the library littered my apartment, some piled on my desk while others were thrown haphazardly across my couch, kitchen, and bedside table. It was the only mess in the otherwise plain home. The rest of the place was almost completely empty except for the now-useless romantic gifts. Fancy soaps, scented candles, and some horrifically cheesy valentines day cards filled Mike's closet, all of them without purpose.

"Dammit, Mike!" I shouted in frustration. "Why couldn't you spend your money on something *useful*, like your fucking bills?!"

A light thumping sound came from the floor, along with a muffled shout. I immediately shut my mouth. Oh right, I had neighbors, I just didn't think any of them would be home this early in the morning.

I quietly paced around the apartment, gathering the library books in my hand, and dropping them all on my couch. I took a seat next to them and began flipping through each one, looking for some idea on how I could make some money off the System.

But first things first, I needed to set myself some ground rules. I knew I needed money, like two months ago, but there were some lines I wasn't willing to cross. I wasn't a scumbag, so I wasn't going to use the System to scam people or steal from them. Also, I wasn't going to prostitute myself or pimp anyone else out. That just wasn't me.

So, what did that leave me?

I shrugged and dove into the books.

So the System granted me two types of benefits; Attributes and Skills. Attributes could be applied very broadly to my actions, while Skills had to be used more specifically. Too bad my numbers in both were so low, what was I supposed to do with those?! The protagonists in the story books all spent time leveling up before they did anything big. And most of their leveling was done by just living their normal lives.

I'd love to do the same, but I was more likely to starve to death on the street before I became a demigod if I kept up my current "normal life."

Hold on, maybe I could find a job that would let me pay my bills *and* let me focus on leveling up? Charisma seemed like the most useful tool I had, with the greatest versatility in a normal, everyday life. I could use it to convince my boss to give me a promotion, get out of a speeding ticket, or even get a date with a girl way out of my league!

But what kind of job would let me level that up? Maybe something like sales? But with my qualifications, I'd have to work as a telemarketer or something, and I already ruled out being a scumbag. Besides, hanging around those kinds of clowns all day would send me into a murderous rage, with [Detect Cheating] pinging me every second.

But this entire world was filled with cheaters, apparently. I'd caught… 9 cheaters red handed in the two days I'd been here, which is way too many to call it a normal occurrence, and I'd probably catch even more wherever I would go. How the hell was I supposed to live like that?!

I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath. My mind's eye turned inwards to where I remembered feeling the sensation the Skill gave off. After several moments of searching, I found it; a metaphorical switch. I forcefully pulled it, and could feel something change inside, somehow knowing that [Detect Cheating] would bother me no longer.

I let out a smile. My second genuine one since I got here.

I spent the next couple of hours thinking of alternative career choices, without much luck. The storybooks weren't much help either, the few that covered their protagonists' rise to power only describing them doing exactly what I wasn't interested in.

Eventually, I began to grow hungry and made myself a TV dinner for lunch. And what good was a TV dinner without TV? Besides, I deserved a break after how hard I was working! What started out as a half an hour allotment turned into a full hour, then two, and then four. It would've become eight if it weren't for a funny little thing.

The TV went out. And so did my lights. My entire apartment was draped in pitch black, no doubt a memento of my overdue electric bill. If that wasn't a sign I needed to get back to work, I didn't know what was.

I opened the blinds and began to read, wracking my frazzled brain around the very serious problem.

Eventually, the sun began to set and I was once more left in total darkness. Intent to not be outdone by my bad luck, I decided to turn one of Mike's mistakes into a solution. I fished out several of the scented candles from the closet and placed them on the table. The soothing scents of cinnamon, lavender, chamomile, and lemon wafted through the air, forming an utterly horrendous smelling amalgamation.

Thankfully, I only gagged once. Ok, maybe twice. But my lunch stayed in my stomach!

I pushed through the odor and continued reading, trying in vain to eke out any bit of inspiration. Eventually, I was forced to stop when I noticed I was reading through the pages at a snail's pace, despite each of them only holding at most thirty words. My stomach growled something fierce, and I knew I wouldn't be able to continue without something in me.

I shuffled over to the freezer and pulled out another microwave meal, before realizing the terrible truth. It was a *microwave* meal. I didn't have any power. Well, maybe there were some oven-based

instructions instead? Yes, there were! I pumped my fist in victory as I made my way over to the kitchen and turned the device's knob all the way over to 425 degrees, before going back to my books.

When I returned after several minutes to put the meal inside, I realized that the oven was still at room temperature. I carefully looked inside, and saw that its roof was lined with a series of coils. In fact, the range had a quartet of electric coil rings where I would expect burners to be. The entire thing was electric!

I was at my wit's end. The banks were all closed at this hour so I wouldn't be able to withdraw whatever was left of my savings, and Mike, in his infinite wisdom, didn't own a credit card. And it wasn't like I had a girlfriend whose place I could crash at for the night. In fact, I didn't have *anyone* I could turn to… except-

No. I wasn't going to take advantage of Eunice like that. I wasn't going to, I wasn't-

Growl

I softly knocked at the door and waited patiently.

It creaked open, revealing a slightly older woman hosting a concerned frown. "Mike? What's going on?"

"Hi Eunice," I replied awkwardly. "So the power's gone out at my place, and I can't even cook myself dinner. Do you mind if I use your microwave?"

"Not at all! Please, come in!" she softly exclaimed, opening the door all the way. She was wearing a long night gown that hugged her curves, all of them.

I gulped and nodded, stepping inside. "I also brought an extra meal for you, if you wanted. And some scented candles as a gift, since I had some spares."

Chapter 12: A Platonically Romantic Evening

The muted sound of butter knives scraping over cheap cardboard was all that filled the apartment. In the dim glow of a mulberry-scented candle, Eunice and I were seated at her dining table, focused intently on our meals. My chair was soft and well-upholstered while hers was made of plastic. She insisted I had her better seat, despite my protests.

“So, were you saving those candles for your girlfriend?” asked Eunice softly. “It’s a shame you had to waste them on me.”

“It’s not a waste, believe me,” I replied, eyes still locked on the Salisbury steak. “We actually broke up yesterday.”

“What?! How could that happen?” she exclaimed, looking up at me.

“I caught her cheating on me with another man.”

“I see, so that’s why you came here instead of going to her place. I’m sorry that happened, you two looked so happy together. And after you spent so much money on these gifts for her…”

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve already moved on. I think Mi- I already knew it was over but didn’t want to admit it. Our relationship wasn’t going anywhere, and all of these presents are better off with someone much more kind and deserving.”

“Do you really think so?”

I looked up from my meal to see Eunice blushing heavily. My eyes widened and I began to sputter. “I mean, you’ve been a great landlady, and are even letting me use your microwave!”

“It’s the least I can do. But what good hostess doesn’t offer their guest a drink? How about some wine? I have a nice bottle I’ve been saving for a good occasion.”

“No!” I shouted.

Eunice froze.

“I mean, no thank you. Water’s fine.”

“Well alright, let me get us some.”

I let out a sigh as my landlady went to the kitchen.

She soon returned with a pair of fancy glasses filled most of the way with the clear liquid. We each took a sip in thoughtful silence before continuing our conversation.

“Thank you for coming by,” said Eunice. “It’s been pretty lonely these past couple of years since my husband left me for someone much younger. So don’t think you’re alone in that pit of yours.”

I nodded sympathetically. “You deserve better.”

“As do you.”

Another nod.

“Well, seeing as how we’re both pretty lonely, maybe there’s a way for us to keep each other even more company? I’d be happy to give your rent back as thanks, of course, so you’ll be able to pay your bills.”

I froze mid breath.

And there it was. This morning, I was intent on not letting this become a thing for the sake of the long term. But now… I really liked having a working microwave. “I-”

Eunice looked down at the table, her face seemingly softening as age suddenly gripped its features. There was a look of regret in her eyes, coupled with something else. It was fear.

“What’s with that look?”

“Sorry?” she said softly, a look of surprise now added to the mix.

“You looked scared when you said that. What’s wrong?”

“I mean, I shouldn’t be propositioning my tenets like this!” Eunice

squeaked as her face turned an even darker shade of beet red than before. “But we’re both going through a lot, I thought it would make us feel better!”

“No, not that,” I said calmly. “You looked genuinely scared by it. Is something going on? Will you get into trouble?”

“I-You… Yes. I will,” she said with a sigh. A single tear began to roll down her left eye. “I need the money to help pay off some debts with the mob.”

“The mob?!” I blurted out. “I thought you were scared somebody was going to find out or something! You really don’t seem like the kind of person to get involved with them.”

“And it was probably one of the worst mistakes of my life,” she said in a slump. “When my husband left me, I tried to fill the hole in my heart with gambling, down in Atlantic City. But I spent too much and ended up owing a lot of money to them. And I need your rent to catch up on my payments, or else…”

“Don’t say anything else, that check is yours.”

“…thank you.”

I closed my eyes for a few seconds before looking back up at Eunice.

“You know, I wonder if they have some kind of sex-based payment plan? I’m sure you have standards to not have picked it, but it just sounds like something out of a por- I mean, something that they would do.”

“I was expecting the same, and even offered! But these people are something different, they’re not interested in anything like that. They only accept money. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” I said with a shiver. Weird how the first competent people I learned about in this world were criminals. And like hell I was joining up with them!

We both sat in silence, contemplating everything. But at that moment, I came to a sudden realization.

Gambling in Atlantic City was what got Eunice into trouble in the first place, but that could be what I was looking for! [Detect Cheating] was able to identify my old boss trying to cheat me out of my pay, so that meant it wasn't limited to just relationships. And that meant it could also work on cheating in gambling! There was my new career, casino security!

My face immediately brightened, even catching Eunice by surprise. But something else came to mind that immediately caused my expression to darken.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"When you mentioned Atlantic City, I thought about how I could get a job at a casino catching cheaters. I realized I have a talent for it today, and thought about making it into a career."

"Well that sounds wonderful! What's so bad about that?"

"The casinos are what got you into this whole mess with the mob. I don't want to be a part of that."

"Nonsense, it was my fault for taking that loan in the first place!" she chided. "But you don't have to make that decision immediately, you still have a place here."

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "The truth is, I actually quit my job this morning and that check I gave you was my last one."

Eunice looked offended. "If I'd known that, there's no way I would've accepted it!"

"I know," I shrugged. "That's why I didn't say anything."

Eunice took a long sip of her water as the two of us sat in silence. Eventually, she looked up at me with a smile.

"I think you have a future in Atlantic City. Even if you don't want to work for a casino, I have an old friend down there who's been looking for someone to help him run his apartment complex. I could call him and recommend you for the job. You could work for him until you decide to try for the casino."

I stared back with an open mouth. “A-are you sure?”

“Of course! I’ve known you for months, you’re one of the most dedicated people I’ve ever met! You would be perfect for the job!”

My mouth slowly closed, and my lips began to spread out into a smile. “I don’t know what to say, Eunice. This is huge. Thank you!”

“It’s nothing, we all need some help once in a while, and you helped me out today by giving me company. I’m just returning the favor.”

“That’s not the only favor. At least this way, you’ll be able to rent out my old place to someone who can actually pay on time!”

We both laughed.

“But really, thank you for being such an amazing landlady. I’ll pack up and move out some time tomorrow.”

“I only did what anyone would do,” she said with a melancholic smile. “And thank *you* again for the company tonight. It might not have been what I expected or really wanted at first, but it was still very fulfilling. I think I’m going to miss you.”

“You’re welcome, I had a good time talking to you as well. And… I think I’m going to miss you too.”

I got up and threw away my cardboard plate, making sure to wash Eunice’s silverware in her sink. With a final nod and thanks, I made my way back to my apartment and got ready for bed. Sleep came to me quickly, pushing away both the apprehension and hope I held for tomorrow.

Chapter 13: Everything's got a drive-thru these days!

So what does someone do when they lose their job? Cry about it? Use their suddenly free schedule to enjoy themselves? Either of those are optional, but generally, they try to find a new job before they go completely broke.

It was a two hour trip from Newark to Atlantic City. I packed everything of value in my apartment, which wasn't much, along with several pairs of clothes and my toothbrush. After dropping off my keys with Eunice and giving her one last heartfelt goodbye, I stopped by the bank to withdraw my final $100 and close the account. They didn't have a branch where I was headed.

"So I gave my old friend a call, and he says he'd love to have you work for him!" Eunice's words echoed through my head. *"Of course he wants to meet you first, so I told him you'd get there by 10 o' clock or 10:30. I'm sure the interview is just for show, but I know you'll give him a good impression either way."*

It was 8 am and I was ready to finally hit the road. The long, quiet hum of the highway on a late-morning Monday morning gave me a chance to properly reflect on my situation. Not about what my next step was, or how I was going to make it to tomorrow, but what the rest of my life was going to look like; how I was going to *live*.

I'd already decided getting sucked into a sexual black hole like the System users of yore wasn't for me. I wanted to find whoever actually kept society running and join their ranks. It kind of sucked that my first lead was the fucking mob. They were the first people I'd heard of here who *didn't* accept sexual favors as payment, but it wasn't like I was planning to find out how they worked for myself.

Just needed to find a job working casino security for a few months while I leveled up, and then… I had no idea. According to all of those stories, the world would be my oyster once I got strong enough. But did I really *want* to do anything crazy? Did I have some kind of ethical obligation to do something with that power? Fuck being a super hero, I still needed someone to save me from this shitshow!

I furrowed my brows as I tried searching for an answer to that question. By the end of the trip, all I had to show for my efforts was a growling stomach. I decided to exit the highway and check out the next drive-thru for lunch.

The first one I found was a building with a dark green paint job and sharp corners, nothing that actually looked like a restaurant. Maybe it was supposed to attract customers via reverse psychology? Or it could've just been some kind of proto-hipster vegan place. Either way, it was working on me.

As I rolled into the lot, I froze at the bold-faced signage printed neatly on the front; "Drive-Thru Divorce." Ok, what the fuck? Curiosity got the better of me, and I drove up to the front window.

"Drive-thru Divorce, where you can be done with your crutch in under 5 minutes, how can I help you?" said a young man as he poked his head out of the window. "Hold on, your spouse needs to be here as well to get things finalized, otherwise I'll have to mail them the documents and wait for their reply."

"Oh, uh," I stuttered. "Is this place for real?"

"Yes sir, it is in fact real," replied the man, barely masking the frustration in his voice. He had a head of short, combed-down black hair and an ill-fitting gray suit and red tie, all the more fitting for the bored look on his face.

"You're telling me a couple can drive through here and get a divorce, just like that?" I asked again. "Kind of like those drive-thru weddings in Vegas?"

The man in the window began to mumble to himself out loud as if I wasn't there. "Law degree from a shitty college and this is what I have to deal with. Never should've listened to my uncle, he said I'd be rolling in big bucks working divorces, but I swear this is worse than retail."

"Do you have to deal with idiots often?" I asked, sympathizing with the lawyer at the mention of retail.

“I’m dealing with one right now.”

“Ouch, but that’s fair. I’ll get out of your hair now, if you’re busy.” I put my car back in drive and began to press down on the accelerator, before being interrupted.

“Hold on, business is pretty slow today so I guess I have a few minutes. Idiot or not, you at least seem to be polite. Especially compared to the customers. Seriously, our other branches don’t have to deal with so many assholes!”

“Uh, thanks, I guess,” I replied, looking side to side for any hidden cameras to see if I was on some kind of prank show again. Alt-history books and the System I could accept, but a Drive-thru Divorce *franchise* was just too much. “So, how much business do you get here anyway?”

“Enough to keep this place open, apparently,” replied the man, rolling his eyes. “We’ve got so many regulars, even if they do only show up once every couple of months, it’s still enough to keep us afloat.”

I remembered reading that the 50% of marriages ending in divorce statistic from back home was skewed because of regulars. It looked like this place wasn’t any different, besides the fact there were enough of them for a place like this to exist.

The lawyer looked down with a sigh and then back at me. “So, how about you? What brings *you* here asking these questions? Haven’t you ever seen the magazine ads?”

“Uh, I don’t read magazines much,” I replied with a shrug. I could find vague recollections of a place like this existing in Mike Smith’s memories, but not many details. He wasn’t much of a magazine person, apparently. But even if he was, knowing *about* this place wasn’t even close to the same as seeing it in person.

“Honestly, I figured you for someone who doesn’t read much at all,” the lawyer said flatly.

“And *I* honestly can’t imagine you get many customers if you treat

people like that. You don't really seem like the customer service type."

"Eh, my customers usually hate each other more than they hate me when they roll up here," he shrugged. "Besides, it was either working here or at a morgue or funeral home."

"What the fuck does law school have to do with either of those?"

The man at the counter sneered at me with a wide grin, holding more than his contempt for *just* me behind his eyes. "Fate pretty much has it written on my forehead that splitting people up is all I'm good for. At least according to my mom."

"What the hell made her say something like that to her kid?"

"She didn't expect to get pregnant when she cheated on my dad, so apparently it was all *my* fault. Whatever, I turned out pretty successful, and the pay here isn't too bad for a lawyer. Better than working 16 hours a day at some big firm downtown."

"Jesus man, you need someone to talk to. Like a friend or a therapist. I mean, it's nothing to be ashamed of, God knows *I* could've used it a few years back."

"My name's Rick, not Jesus," replied the man with a frown. "And don't worry about it, I already have an appointment for couple's therapy right after work."

"What does this have to do with your spouse?"

"I'm single, so it's just me and a bottle of whiskey."

"Hey, whiskey isn't going to fix things in the long term, I say this from experience." I let out a sigh and tried once more to give the man a genuine smile. "If a total piece of shit like me can find happiness, a simple loser like you deserves it even more."

"Huh," he replied thoughtfully. "That's probably the nicest thing anyone's said to me in a while. I think I'll tone it down to a couple of beers instead, just for you. But man, things would be easier if I was a System user, though."

I froze as the man's words hit me. Could he have known?

"And there I go acting like a fucking weirdo," he said upon witnessing my reaction. "Well, an even bigger weirdo than you, at least."

"W-what do you mean?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. It looked like I was in the clear, but I didn't know for sure yet.

"When I was a kid, I was always obsessed with stories about the System, and I always wanted to have it myself so I could do whatever I wanted to. At first, I thought it would bring my parents back together, along with everyone's parents! And when I accepted the truth that that would probably never happen, I thought the System could at least make my life a little easier. But maybe I could still help people out with it? Make their lives not as shitty as mine is."

I nodded at him sagely, though it was mostly out of relief for my secret being safe. "Yeah, life *would* be easier with something like that." I looked up at the man at the counter with a sincere face and smiled. "Hey, thanks for humoring me. Take it easy, you really do deserve to be happier."

"Sure, thanks for letting me kill some time."

I drove out of the lot and to an actual restaurant drive-thru. While eating my burger and fries, I thought back to the man's words. He honestly deserved the System more than me, if only because he knew what to do with it. That, and because he still had a heart. I wasn't going to be a superhero, I still had myself to save.

Chapter 14: The Interview (gone wrong) (gone sexual)

The part of the day that could be considered morning was over, and the sun was just past its apex. While I would've loved a chance to freshen up, I was starting to run late for my interview.

I exited the highway into the nearby suburbs and navigated the local roads to my destination. I pulled into the apartment complex and parked my car in the visitor parking. Even though I had no suit, I'd made sure to wear my best set of clothes, a white dress shirt and khakis. I was the definition of business casual! At least I was when I first left my old place. The AC in my car broke partway through and there were sweat stains forming underneath my armpits.

Hopefully nobody would notice as long as I kept my arms down, but just to be sure, I gave my hair one last comb over. Everything counted when making a good impression, after all.

I locked my car door and made my way to the front office, past several three-storey buildings that littered the property. After a quick knock on the door, I was welcomed with an aged, yet lively voice from the other side.

"The door's open, please come in!"

Taking the cue, I twisted the handle and made my way inside.

The main office was exactly as I expected it. The floor was covered in carpeting somewhere between forest and puke green, the walls were covered in a yellow and white striped wallpaper, and the desk at the center was made of a heavily worn wood. Sitting at the desk was an equally old man. He had a pleasant demeanor and was of some kind of asian ancestry. He was probably in his 70s or 80s, and looked like he'd been sitting in that office for at least half his life.

"Uh, hi. I'm Chuc- I mean Mike. Mike Smith. I'm here for an interview…" I said, my words beginning to cut out. I silently cursed at myself. This was an interview, confidence mattered! But this was also an interview for a job I knew nothing about. How could I *not* be nervous?!

“Oh, you must be Eunice’s friend! She’s told me so much about you, and I don’t think you’ll disappoint!” He flashed me a smile, which was all I could make out of his face. His eyes were entirely covered by his white hair.

“Thank you, sir,” I replied, returning the grin.

“Please, call me Hiroi, I’m the manager here at Karling apartments. We’ve been looking for a new handyman since the old one was promoted, and you might just fill that role!”

I nodded along.

“For your interview, I’ll just have you fix a broken oven. If you do well, the job’s yours!”

My head froze. “Uh, Hiroi… what exactly will happen if I *can’t* fix it?”

“Then you won’t get the job,” he shrugged.

“And then what would I do?” I thought to myself. *“It wasn’t like I had any other career lined up here, and I only have a hundred bucks on me!”*

As if he could read my mind, the old man let out a short chuff of laughter. “Eunice told me about your circumstances, how you came here for a fresh start. I actually have several jobs lined up for you, but I figured I’d start by seeing how well you’d do at the highest paid one first. If you don’t have an aptitude for that, I could have you tending the grounds. That doesn’t pay as much, but it’s still more than enough to live a comfortable life.”

I let out a sigh I didn’t know I was carrying and a weight lifted off my shoulders. Hiroi was right, but I didn’t remember telling Eunice about why I’d actually quit. Maybe she figured it out on her own after talking to me, or maybe she was just giving me a more sympathetic backstory. Either way, I was grateful to her.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you drifting off?”

“Huh? Oh no, sorry. It’s just that I’ve never actually repaired an oven before, I don’t think I’m qualified to do it.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve saved the manuals for all of the appliances we have here, so you can refer to that. Everyone has to start somewhere, am I right?”

I nodded back. “Sure, I’ll give it a shot.”

“Great, let’s head out then!” exclaimed Hiori. He bent down and with a grunt, slowly lifted a large tome and placed it on top of his desk. “This baby should have everything you need to figure it out!”

I stared at the massive stack of papers with a blank expression. They didn’t exactly have video tutorials I could look up online in this world, so this is how they made up for it. I lifted the book and followed my hopefully would-be boss outside.

I followed Hiroi out the front door at a sedate pace, taking in the sights of what might be my new home. The apartment complex was constructed on a very sizable lot of land, with there being 4 separate buildings that each housed a collection of apartments and various utilities, such as a large trash and recycling bin, and parking spaces.

Each building was labeled by letter, starting from A all the way to D, the latter of which being where we started. Each was built somewhat differently, the first few buildings looking a little more worn than the others.

“So you’ve seen the lettering?” asked Hiroi. “These buildings weren’t constructed all at once. We’ve had to expand to meet the needs of the city and its growth over all these years. Even when my family and I were interned during the second World War, the apartment complex continued to grow! I was lucky that the family I handed this place over to during that time was kind enough to return it in even better condition and with a new building.”

I nodded along, but couldn’t help opening my eyes wide. Even with how hyper sexualized this world was, it still matched with the darker parts of history from back home. World War II, the internment of Japanese Americans. Who knew what else? A few ideas on how the horniness of this place could’ve affected those dark parts of American history flew through my mind, but I quickly shook it off. That just

felt disrespectful, their people had suffered enough.

After some time, the apartment manager came to a stop in front of a door on the ground floor of building A. “Here’s the apartment with the broken oven. Let’s go on inside and-”

“You fucking whore!” came a muffled shout from inside. “And you! You son of a bitch!”

The old man and I stared wide-eyed at the door. Hiroi slowly walked over to the window to see what was going on.

I looked at him, utterly aghast at his behavior. Staring into peoples’ houses was rude, no matter what kind of juicy drama was going on inside. But that didn’t stop me from following his lead.

“Hey man, it’s not like that, I’m just doing my job!” came another voice from inside. It was another man. “Hey, what are you doing with- oh shit!”

I grabbed Hiroi and jumped down onto the grass below us as a massive CRT television flew through the window. Glass shattered and was sprayed out in the flying TV’s path, but we were thankfully far enough away to be left untouched.

“Get back here, you motherfucker!” shouted the first voice as a young man opened the front door and ran out.

“Hey Hiroi,” said the sprinting newcomer as he passed us by. “That guy’s out for my blood, so it looks like I’ll have to quit and move! I’ll be back to pick up my things later, sorry!”

The old man nodded understandingly, and waved the young man goodbye from his spot on the grass.

“Where the fuck is he?! I’ll kill him! I’ll fucking kill him!!!” shouted the same voice from before. The man it belonged to emerged from the open doorway, his bloodshot eyes and 5-o’-clock shadow contrasting the business casual button up shirt and dress pants he wore. And I couldn’t get past how despite all of that, he still somehow looked better than me. “You, landlord! Where the fuck did he go?!”

“Away, apparently,” replied Hiroi. “He didn’t tell me where, sadly.”

“Wh-why? What did he do?” I blurted out, realizing too late that I already knew the answer to that question, and that I’d just dug myself into this shitshow.

“That bastard fucked my wife!” shouted the man in a scream wrought with pain. “I’m gonna kill him!”

The landlord and I stayed silent as we regarded the victim, whose head jerked left and right as if expecting the man whose blood he craved to simply appear to his side. Eventually, he finally realized that he wouldn’t be able to get at him, so he set his eyes on the other half of his anger.

“You…” he said in a low growl, looking back towards his apartment.

A woman peeked her head out the doorway, a look of utter fear plastered over her face… along with another substance. She held a phone in her left hand and was frantically talking into it, making motions with her free hand that looked akin to scribbling something down on a piece of paper.

“You *chose* to fuck that fucker!” shouted the man. “How the hell could you?! We’ve been married for years, and this is how you repay me for everything I’ve done for you?!”

The woman finished her phone call and disconnected the landline, letting the corded receiver fall to the floor. “Everything you’ve done? You’ve been working nonstop, never spending any time with me! I’m your wife, Harold!”

“And that’s why I’ve been working so hard! To provide for *you*!”

“You love your job more than me, and I have needs! I was just getting what you *couldn’t* provide! Love!”

Before the argument could escalate further, I began to hear a faint siren. As the man named Harold approached his wife, the sound grew louder, until it was apparent to everyone that they were headed here.

A heavily armored car, followed by an ambulance, barreled into the

apartment complex, and parked right in front of us. Out of the car came a pair of what I could only describe as SWAT officers. Decked from head to toe in thick slabs of body armor, the two were a menacing sight to behold.

But they would've been even more intimidating if they carried real weapons with them. Rather than semi-automatic shotguns or tear gas, these officers were equipped with batons, pepper spray, and a colorful book that looked like a cross between a bible and a children's magazine.

"Everything will be fine, you two!" shouted the first officer as he pulled open the book and began reading from it. "For the goal of life is to create a story, and a life of excitement creates the greatest story, so says Ultarian."

The couple froze as they looked upon the officer and took in his words.

His compatriot approached the two with open arms and hugged the man, letting him bleed off his range as he impotently pummeled the officer's thick, padded armor.

"What is this, the sexual inquisition?" I whispered to Hiroi, having picked up on the religious vibe from the two policemen.

"Domestic Dispute Mediation officers," replied the old man. "Don't tell me you've never heard of DDM, they've been around from even before *my* time!"

"Uh, I don't get out much, actually."

"Oh, you youngins. What do they teach you in school nowadays? No matter, I'll be the one to do the job then."

As the manager collected his thoughts, I searched the recesses of Mike Smith's mind for any details on this "DDM," and what they were all about. All I was able to find was the fact that such a group existed, so I decided to let my tour guide be the one to elucidate me.

"Whenever a domestic dispute like this gets violent, they dispatch the DDM to defuse the situation. The woman probably mentioned that

she and her husband are religious, so that's the strategy these two fine officers are using to calm them down, quoting scripture."

"I've never heard of that scripture before," was all I could say.

"You need to go to church more often, then. I know it isn't fun, but what you learn there will help guide you through the rest of your life."

I silently nodded along. Once again, Mike Smith's old memories only told me that such a scripture did exist, and nothing more. Was he *really* this sheltered or was I losing touch with what was left of him?

"Perhaps we should go?" asked Hiroi as he nudged my arm, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, I think I've seen enough."

The old man nodded. He turned around and faced towards Harold. "Excuse me, we're here to fix your oven! Mike Smith here will be doing it as part of his interview, if you don't mind."

Harold looked towards us with murder in his eyes. "Someone just tried to fuck my wife. I'm not letting *anyone* else get near her today."

Hiroi sighed, then looked at me apologetically. "That was the only call I had today. You'll have to come back tomorrow when he's calmed down or someone else has something that needs fixing."

"But what about the other positions?" I asked.

"I'm in a hurry to get someone new for any of them, so whichever one you interview for is the one you get."

I looked down at my feet. With only a hundred dollars to my name, who knew if I could actually last until then? But I could've just gone for another position, like groundskeeper. Still, I didn't like the idea of letting a better job slip through my fingers like that. I was going to regret what I was about to do.

"Sir, I'm not going to touch your wife." I said, looking intently at the man. I felt something flowing through me, a glibness that didn't feel

entirely natural, but was still part of me somehow. It was the System, my Charisma. “I respect what you two have and would not *dare* get between that.”

Harold stared at me with a glazed look, his anger having slightly abated.

“Please, trust me. I just want to help get your oven fixed so you can live your best life, I swear on the Scripture.”

“The Scripture itself?” He growled. “You’d better not be saying that in vain, buddy.”

“I’m not.” I totally was.

Harold exhaled. “Then fine, get in here and fix it, already. I’ll be watching you, though.”

The manager looked at me with an appreciative smile and began to lead me inside the apartment. “Wow, you have quite a way with words, Mike.”

“Thanks,” I nodded. “It was honestly a miracle that they worked.”

Hiroi nodded. “I could especially use you now, since I have yet *another* employee I need to replace.”

“Wait, you mean the guy that just ran away?” I asked.

“That’s right. He used to be the handyman before his promotion. Now I have three jobs I need to fill.”

I just hoped that whatever job I ended up with would be much more quiet than that guy’s.

[Level Up! (4)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +0 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +1]

[Str: 12 | Con: 12 | End: 12 | Cha: 16 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 12 | Int: 13]

Chapter 15: One Job, Two Job, Shit Job, Lewd Job

My eyes darted over the pages in the thick packet in search of something useful. I probably could've found what I was looking for by now, but I was kind of… distracted.

"Lay one finger on my wife, and I will rip your throat out, pal!" the man behind me shouted. I felt a puff of hot air from his nostrils on my neck.

"Don't worry sir, I'm just here to fix your oven," I replied. "If you'd let me concentrate." That last part came out as a whisper.

As much as I wanted to, I really couldn't blame this guy's attitude. He'd just caught his wife cheating on him after all. Sure, it looked like they'd made up, but he was obviously still feeling raw, at least judging by how he acted.

Hiroi, the apartment complex's manager, stood next to him. The asian man looked over my shoulder and groaned as I turned the page of the oven manual. He lifted his finger and opened his mouth as I turned it again, but stayed silent.

When everyone's stares felt like they were just finished drilling through my skull, I figured it out.

"Hey, I think I found something here," I said. "So the problem is that the oven isn't getting hot enough, right?"

"Yeah," grumbled the husband.

"Looks like it could be caused by a loose contact between the heating coil and the socket. Let me take a look."

I opened up the oven door and slid my head inside. The flashlight Hiori had given me lit up the tiny space, and gave me a good view of everything there. The racks were already moved outside, leaving just the clean oven floor and the heating coils on the ceiling. They were crooked.

Taking a closer look, I could see that one of the connectors wasn't

properly inserted into its socket. It was pulled out and had one of its pins bent. This definitely wasn't something explicitly written in the book, but I could still understand the problem easily enough.

"Hey, could someone pass me the pliers?" I asked, my voice echoing through tight space.

Someone handed them to me, and I looked back to say thank you. I was met with Harold's bloodshot eyes. I let out a yelp as the sudden shock made me slam my head against the ceiling.

"Are you alright?" asked the landlord, bending over to take Harold's place. Thankfully, *his* gaze was blocked by the white hair completely covering his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I replied, rubbing my head. I turned back to the ceiling and began to work.

I started by pulling the heating coil all the way out of the socket and looking at the damage. The bent pin was twisted at multiple spots, as if someone slammed a hammer into it to make some kind of a copper lightning bolt.

With a quick twist of the pliers, the pin was mostly back into shape. Enough so that it would at least fit back in place. And with a forceful push, the coil was back on the socket.

"There we go, that should fix it!" I exclaimed as I slowly exited the oven. I couldn't help but brightly smile at my handiwork. "One of the connector pins was bent out of shape, like someone purposefully bent it at multiple spots. Any idea what could've caused it?"

"Well, my step-sister was visiting right before the problem started, and she got stuck inside."

"Wait, stuck inside?" I asked.

"Yeah, her hair got caught or something, I don't know. It must've happened when I tried to get her out."

"Yeah, alright," I nodded along. I wasn't stupid enough to ask for any more details. "So how should we test it?"

“I’ve got a roast in the freezer that we could cook,” slowly replied the husband. “If it comes out undercooked, you’re eating it.”

As far as threats went, it wasn’t exactly scary. But I still gulped.

“Hey, it looks like it works! Thanks!” Exclaimed the man, showing the first bit of happiness I’d seen out of him today.

“No problem, only doing my job,” I said with a nod, followed by a wink to Hiroi.

The manager smiled back.

“You two can go now, I’ve got a looong dinner with my wife now.”

“You two have fun,” the old Asian man replied. “And I’ll add the bill for your broken window to next month’s rent. They can be expensive to replace.”

I could’ve sworn I saw a vein bulge on the husband’s forehead. But his widening eyes and deep frown were a bit more telling.

Hiroi finally got a clue and hastily led us out of the apartment, back to his office.

He slammed the door shut, locked it, and when he finally regained his composure, gave me a massive smile. “You did it, Mike! You passed!”

“Huh? For real?!” I stuttered in response. My thoughts were still on the rabid gorilla back at the apartment; the fact that I was being interviewed completely slipped my mind.

“That’s right! You solved a problem that wasn’t even *written* in the book! So now you’ve got the job! Come over to my desk, I’ll give you details and employment contract.”

Hiroi took a seat at his chair and laid out several sheets of paper.

I took my place on the other side of the desk and followed the older man’s lead.

“So your base pay will be $15 an hour, with all of the standard benefits like insurance,” Hiroi began. “On top of that, you’ll also get a place to stay, in Building A’s managerial apartment.”

“Managerial apartment?” I asked. “How big is that compared to the place we saw?”

“About three times as big, when it comes to square footage.”

“Wait, *three*?! With a name like that, I thought you were going to throw me in a supply closet or something!”

“Oh no, I could never do that to someone with such an important job!” the old man let out a small chuckle. He looked up at me and his eyes seemingly twinkled behind his hair.

“Haha, yeah,” I replied with my own awkward smile.

“Right, so just sign here and the job is yours! You’ll be working Monday through Friday during standard working hours, but you might be called in to help out on weekends if nobody is available.”

I nodded along. Wait, what did he mean by nobody available? “Hold on, do you mean somebody else would be working on weekends? Why wouldn’t I have to work then?”

“Some of the younger men take weekend overtime to impress their bosses, but it rarely works out that way. You’ll need to be working when they aren’t available.”

“Hold on, you expect the residents to fix their own problems? Then why did I fix that guy’s oven? Couldn’t he have taken care of it him-” I stopped before I completed my sentence. The weird hours, the insane benefits, how didn’t I see it sooner? “This isn’t for the handyman job, is it?”

Hiroi scratched the back of his head. “I guess you caught me! You’re really sharp, and that’s a skill that you’ll need for this particular career.”

I glared at the old man. “You didn’t even tell me this was for a different job. I was about to sign.”

“I wanted to know you were interested in all of the benefits first before I told you the responsibilities!” Hiroi gave me a weak smile. “It’s not like you’re holding a pen, I would’ve given you the details before you wrote anything.”

I let out an angry sigh. “Fine, so what job is this?”

“Do you remember the man who ran out of that apartment earlier?”

“Yeah, he got caught screwing that guy’s wife, what about it?”

“He was in the middle of his job.”

“He was pretty bad at it then. At least you don’t have to go through the trouble of firing him. So what *was* his actual job?”

Hiroi looked back up at me. His mouth was curled into a frown and I could feel a hardened expression behind his white hair. “That *was* his actual job. And he was damn good at it.”

I just stared at the old man, trying to put his words together. The pieces began to fit together and my jaw began to drop. “You mean, his job was-”

“Satisfying lonely housewives, yes.” Hiroi gave me a solemn nod. “It’s an important duty that many of the women here can’t live without. And I want to offer this job to you.”

I leaned back into my seat. What did I just get myself into?

Chapter 16: Deal or "Stick your deal where the sun don't shine!"

"This job is incredibly important, and I need to fill it in as soon as possible." The apartment manager regarded me with a stern gaze. It was a funny sight, with his eyes completely obscured by his long, white hair. But the frown on his lips broke that illusion. This was serious to him.

I sat in his office. My right leg was bent and crossed over my left knee while my right hand was scratching my head. I didn't know whether I should've been grinning or frowning at Hiroi's request, so I did both. Who knew how ugly I looked, but the old man in front of me didn't care.

"The housewives who live here get incredibly lonely with their husbands always working so late, they need someone to alleviate it."

"So you want me to have sex with them while their husbands are away?" I asked. I tried to laugh, but the air escaped my lungs in a wheeze.

"Yes, exactly." Hiroi gave me a solemn nod. "Toys are only able to do so much, they need real human interaction, an actual person on the other end, true love!"

"True love?" This time I was able to laugh, but it came out as a mirthless chuckle.

"When you're having sex selflessly, for the sake of your partner's enjoyment, isn't that true love?"

I slowly blinked. Pinching myself felt very tempting, but I already knew this wasn't a dream.

"Mike, I've gotten to know you pretty well from your interview and everything Eunice had to say, I know I can trust you with this! If not you, then those poor ladies would have to find or hire some random stranger off the streets instead! At least this way, I'll know that they're in kind and tender hands. Nobody will love them more than

you!”

Something about his last line snapped me back to my senses. I put both of my feet down to the ground and leaned over with a frown. “Well what about their husbands? Do you think I’ll love those ladies more than them?”

“I’m sure those men love their wives, but they aren’t doing enough for them! I’m sure they would understand you-”

“Bullshit!” I shouted. “I saw how the last guy got chased out, the guy whose wife he fucked was out for his blood!”

“I promise you, that was a one-time thing. The husbands’ schedules are always known about from their wives and neighborhood gossip. The last guy was just a risk taker and got caught today. You’re careful and attentive, so there’s no way you’ll mess up.”

“But-”

“Besides, this apartment complex has some of the fewest visits by Domestic Dispute Mediators, so it’s one of the safest places around for this kind of job!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, I-”

“And I know today was scary, so I’ll bump up your pay to $20 an hour, with plenty of extra for overtime on weekends and holidays! I’m sure you’d love to-”

“No, cheating is fucked up!” I finally shouted.

The room fell silent as Hiroi looked at me. He swept his hair out of his face just long enough for me to see a pair of brown eyes frozen in shock.

“Well, what is it? What else do I have to say?” I continued. “Cheating is morally wrong, and I’m not going to do it!”

“Cheating is an inevitability,” Hiroi growled. “With the way these housewives are treated, they’ll do it anyway, whether it’s with you or some delivery boy. At least with you, it’ll be someone they can trust.”

“Well have they tried talking to their husbands about their ‘poor treatment’, then? Like fucking adults?! ‘Hey honey, spending time with you is more important to me than money, don’t work so much overtime.’ There, problem solved!”

“Of course they don’t, it’s not… that simple!” He looked a little woozy, but quickly recovered.

I scoffed and looked at Hiroi right where his eyes would be. “If they’re ready to cheat instead of fixing the root of their problem, then they deserve to be lonely.”

Hiroi stared back at me. I could feel his gaze growing cold underneath his hair. He spoke to me in a whisper. “You really did grow up sheltered. How will you make it anywhere in this world?”

“I… don’t know.” My voice faltered. I looked down onto the papers scattered about the old man’s desk. Everything that I could’ve asked for was laid down before me on a silver platter; high pay, an apartment the size of a small mansion, and an easy way to gain levels.

I didn’t want it. I already decided what I wasn’t willing to do, and if I pushed the goal post once, I could do it again. Fallacy or not, I didn’t trust myself on any kind of slippery slope. Not anymore.

Eventually, I rose from my seat and slowly made my way towards the exit. Honestly, why did I expect things to be so easy? With so little to my name,I had to find some kind of job now, and fast.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” asked Hiroi. His voice was softer than before, but tired. “I thought you wanted to work as a handyman?”

I slowly turned around and looked back at the old man. I pointed a finger to my chest and looked around the room to see if there was anyone else he could’ve been talking to.

“Of course I mean you! That was what the interview was for, wasn’t it? I’m sure that *this* job won’t offend your sensibilities.”

“I was… I mean I am, but I thought you wouldn’t want me here?”

“Mike, let me tell you something.” The apartment manager let out a sigh. “I’ve been in this business for a long time, and I’ve learned that you don’t let go of good people. New generations always think differently than the old, and yours is no exception. And while we might not see eye to eye on this one issue, I see that you care for what’s right in your own way, just from a different perspective.”

“With how I think cheating is wrong?”

“With how you care about the husbands. You’re not a bad person, Mike, and I would love to have you as an employee.”

I looked around the room, my eyes falling on the various pictures covering the walls. They featured all sorts of families standing in front of their apartments. Sometimes there were guests amongst them. Usually, the wife would have a hand placed on their butt. Oftentimes, it was the husband.

I turned back to Hiroi. “So it really is an inevitability, then.” It wasn’t a question.

He nodded back at me.

I felt something in me crumble. Calling it my ‘faith in humanity’ would’ve been too hyperbolic, but it felt more like how much of a shit I gave about the world around me. At the end of the day, how others lived their lives really wasn’t any of my business, was it? I was still me and I was still living life the way *I* wanted to. Sure, just seemingly abandoning everyone else left a sour taste in my mouth, but at the same time, who was I to demand everyone live the way I wanted them to? As long as they didn’t force it on me, things would be fine. I let out a sigh. “If the handyman job really *is* just that; a handyman job, then I’ll take it.”

The old man smiled at me. “Then it’s good to have you aboard.”

Chapter 17: First Day on the Job

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I opened my eyes in a haze and looked at the ceiling. I didn't recognize it. I didn't recognize anything in the room. The night stand, the beeping alarm clock, the old CR TV. And all of it was apparently now mine to enjoy.

As I got out of the bed and hit the alarm, I began to remember the previous day. Hiroi ended up hiring me as a handyman and even moved me into an already furnished apartment! All I had to do was wake up at-

"7 am," I said out loud as I looked at the large, analog display through crusty eyes. I was able to pull off getting up early two days ago for Mike Smith's old job, but that was a one-time thing. Having to do it every weekday would be something else entirely.

On my way out of the bedroom, I bumped into the end table. The pain pushed me back a foot, and since there wasn't much space, I fell back down onto my mattress. I took a deep breath and considered staying there. "Fuck, this place is cramped!"

I ended up deciding otherwise and quickly got up and headed to the bathroom, ignoring the bruise forming on my leg. The whole event somehow took a good five minutes according to my clock, so I had to settle for just brushing my teeth and washing my face. I'd take a proper shower in the afternoon, I didn't trust myself not to zone out and be late for my first day on the job.

After freshening up, I went into the kitchen to get myself a cup of coffee. My gourmet latte was made of a cup of milk I put in the microwave for a minute, mixed with a spoonful of sugar and instant coffee powder. Could I do better? Sure. But why bother when all I needed was that sweet, sweet caffeine.

My mind began to drift off into what I would be doing if I didn't have to wake up so early, and I remembered my time from back home. Being up all night, waking up the next day at noon with a massive

headache… I snapped back to reality and took a massive swig of my drink. Hell, I'd wake up before sunrise if it meant I didn't have to go back to that!

I threw the paper cup into the trash and made my way outside.

The sun had been up for some time and many of the residents were leaving their own homes alongside me, headed to work or just wanting to get some of the fresh, morning air. Most of the latter were retirees from the D building. My neighbors.

"Hello there, you look like a new face!" exclaimed an old woman as soon as she saw me. Her hair was pure white and her skin looked like it had more wrinkles than actual skin. "Did you just move in?"

"Yeah, yesterday in fact," I replied with a nod. "I'm the new handyman, Mike Smith."

"Well hello, Mike. I'm Glinda! And hold on, you said new one? I heard rumors that the last one quit, so it must be true." She nodded somberly. "But it's good to see Hiroi be proactive and already have a new one ready!"

It took my caffeine-addled brain a moment to process what she'd said. I started to blush. "Wait no, I'm not replacing *that* guy. I mean, I'm replacing his old position, but not what his position was right before he quit."

Glinda had already begun to walk away.

I watched her leave while ignoring everything I was saying, and decided to just let out a sigh and continue on with my day. What was the worst one mistaken old lady going to do anyway?

The apartment complex's main office wasn't far off from where I stopped. Another minute of walking and I was at the front door. I knocked and entered, coming face to face with my new boss.

"Mike, you're here!" exclaimed Hiroi, completely unfazed by the early hour. "I've already gotten a call for you! Just grab the toolbox and manual on washing machines, and head over to apartment A205."

“You got it, boss.” I picked up everything I would need and headed back out the door towards building A.

I shuffled my way there with half-open eyes that were still in the process of properly opening, the coffee still taking effect. But the caffeine fully hit me as I reached A205, and made my heart skip a beat. The front window was boarded up with cardboard and the grass in front of it had orange cones in front of it. No, it wasn’t my coffee that had me on edge. I recognized this place.

With a gulp, I made my way to the front door and rang the doorbell. It took less than three seconds for the door to open. A woman wearing a slightly see-through nightgown greeted me with a smirk and hungry eyes.

“So you’re the new repairman, huh? I need your help to fix something, do you think you’re up to the task?”

I let out a slow exhale and focused all of my willpower into keeping eye contact with her. I didn’t let my gaze go downwards towards her exposed cleavage.

“Is something wrong?” she asked. She held her smile, but her eyes told a different story. “Are you going to stand there staring at me or come inside?”

“Is Harold here?” I asked.

“My husband? You know him?”

“I was here yesterday to fix your oven.”

“Oh, that was you! Well don’t worry, he’s not here today, and he won’t be back until much later.” She turned around and walked inside, pausing once in a while to thrust her hips one way or another. It was probably supposed to be seductive.

I shrugged and walked inside. Hiroi said that the wives had a good handle on their husbands’ schedules, so I was probably safe. Just in case, I shook my head to wake myself up even more. I wanted to get in and out as fast as possible.

Chapter 18: “I’m stuck, step br-” “Don’t worry, I brought WD-40”

“Follow me,” said the loosely dressed woman as she sauntered into her empty apartment. She wiggled her hips every few steps, no doubt to catch my interest.

She was somewhat successful, though the act was more unnerving than seductive. It looked like she was trying to close some imaginary open fridge door every time she did that.

I walked a respectable distance behind her so she wouldn’t accidentally slam me into the wall.

“So my washing machine’s been acting up, and I was hoping you could take a look at it. It’s right over here.”

The woman stopped in front of a closet and opened it to reveal a washer and dryer stacked on top of each other. She put her hand on the bottom machine and gave it a pat.

“Sure, I’ll take a look at it,” I said, opening up the device’s manual and getting lost in its pages. “What seems to be the problem, miss?”

“It’s Becky,” she said in a low, sensual growl. “Well, the *real* problem is that I have no way to pay you for your hard work! Maybe there’s something else I could do for you in return? You fix my washer, and I check your pipes?”

I idly flipped a page without looking up. “Huh? The apartment complex pays me, don’t worry about it, Becky. So what’s wrong? It looks like each possible problem only has one or two causes, so it should be an easy job.”

If I’d gazed up from the book, I would’ve received a look that was somewhere between a death glare and deer in headlights. “Uh, the problem is… coming from inside! Yeah, let me open it up and show you!”

Becky bent down, opened the machine, and inserted her torso inside.

“It’s right here, it’s… uh, hey?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, looking away from the manual.

“I think I’m stuck!”

“Oh shit, you are?!” My heart skipped a beat at the unexpected emergency.

“Yeah, stuck real tight in here!” Becky exclaimed. “My hair’s stuck on the hooks and holes inside! And I think my shoulders won’t budge either!”

I quickly turned back to the diagram in the manual. The inside of the dryer was shown to be almost completely smooth, and the hole was more than wide enough for anyone to squeeze out of. I frowned. “Oh, right.”

“Oh, what is a poor, young lady supposed to do in this situation! If only there were some big, strong man who could help shake me loose, but I wonder how he could do so? Maybe if he helped make me sweaty with some kind of exercise, that could work too? But what could I possibly do to work up a sweat in here?” She began to violently shake her hips up and down, hoping I would finally take the hint. I did.

I turned my head around, looking for the hidden camera or for whoever was holding it to say something sleazy. But no, the apartment was clean. What was happening was completely natural.

The woman violently shook her hips several more times.

With an angry sigh, I put away the manual and went down to my knees. I grabbed each of her legs by the lower thigh with my arms in a firm lock.

“Oh, I think *this* could work,” Becky said. Her voice was muffled from the washer.

I planted my legs on the ground and pulled with all of my might. The woman barely gave any resistance as I pulled her out of the machine and onto the floor.

She yelped as her face planted into the carpet and kicked at me as she pushed herself up. “What the hell is your problem?!”

I looked back at her balefully. “My *problem* is that I’m just trying to do my job!”

“Then why the hell aren’t you doing it?! You’re Hank’s replacement after he quit yesterday, aren’t you? So start having sex with me! How obvious do I have to be?!”

“I’m just the handyman!” I screamed back, rising to my feet. “Hiroi told me to come and fix your washer, so that’s why I’m doing it? Why the hell else would I have the manual and a toolbox with me?”

“Well, I mean… would you consider doing both jobs today?”

I glared at her. “If I was even remotely interested in Hank’s old job, I would’ve taken it from the get-go.”

“…oh.” Becky deflated. All the sensuality she was trying to project, all the anger she was currently feeling, simply vanished. She looked down at the floor. “Everyone in the complex was talking about it, I really thought you *were* the replacement.”

That old lady really had to have been responsible for this. I let out another sigh, and after a few seconds of thinking, held out my hand. “Hey, don’t worry about it. It looks like it was really an honest mistake, I can’t blame you.”

Becky slowly looked back up at me. She gave me a brief smile and took my hand.

I helped her back to her feet and returned the expression. “So, what’s *really* wrong with your washer?”

“Huh? Nothing’s wrong with it, I just needed an excuse to get you- I mean Hank’s replacement, to come over. That was one of the codewords.”

“Oh, right. I should’ve figured.” I rolled my eyes, though I couldn't help but feel a bit curious. “But why do you even need Hank to come over in the first place? You’ve got a husband, right?”

“A husband who’s never around,” Becky replied in a huff.

“Have you tried talking to him about it?” I shot back.

“Yeah, and he got me some toys to keep me entertained while he’s away.”

I waved my hand in a circle, prompting her to continue.

“And they were helping, but they’re all dirty right now and the dishwasher is broken.”

“Well why didn’t you call it in? Fixing things is my job!”

“Eh, I figured this was more urgent.”

I sat cross-legged in front of the open dishwasher. Becky was kneeling on the other side, pointing out colorful bits of melted plastic and rubber that dotted the appliance.

“I mean, how was *I* supposed to know that it wasn’t dishwasher safe!” The lady whined to me. “Everything Harold’s gotten me has always been fine to clean this way, why should it have been different *this* time?”

“Well, did you read the manual?” I asked, waving the thick booklet I was currently leafing through.

“Of course not! Who the hell ever reads that? You just put in some batteries, flip a switch, and stick it inside you. You don’t need a manual for that!”

I shrugged. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

After Becky told me of her actual woes, I went back to the apartment complex’s office and picked up the manual for her dishwasher. It wasn’t too difficult to understand, but there wasn’t anything in it that told me how to deal with… this.

“So, any clues?” asked Becky. She leaned closer towards me. “I really don’t think I can hang much longer.”

“Nope,” I replied. My head was still buried in the book. With one final sigh, I slammed the tome shut and set it down by my side. “So I guess I’ll have to improvise.”

I opened up my toolbox and pulled out a chisel.

Becky jumped back as I slammed the sharp end into the dishwasher and right underneath one of the pieces of melted plastic.

With a heave, I pried the melted sex toy off the hard frame and onto Becky’s face.

“Hey, watch it!” she shouted at me.

“Sorry! But if you’re feeling impatient, you could always head to the bathroom and use that to relieve yourself.”

She glared at me.

I smiled.

Two hours. It took two whole hours for me to pry every last piece of rainbow-colored material out of the dishwasher. I was completely covered in sweat and out of energy. But the job was done.

Becky walked by the kitchen and gave me a sideways glance. She looked much more relaxed than before. “Are you done? Is it working now?”

“I’m about to find out.” I closed the machine, but not before Becky threw an oblong pink object inside. I didn’t catch what it was, but it wasn’t much of a mystery.

“What? This one’s safe, I found it still in its box underneath the bathroom sink and checked the manual this time! Just for you.” She gave me a wink.

I ignored it and turned the dishwasher on.

It began to beep, and then…

We both heard the sound of water filling the machine, and it starting to swish it around.

“Oh my god, it works! Thank you!” Becky ran over and pulled me into a strong embrace.

I sheepishly hugged her back and patted her on the shoulder twice.

She pulled back after a moment and flashed me a smile. “Seriously, you’re a lifesaver!”

“No problem, it’s all in a day’s work,” I nodded.

[Skill Obtained! Tinker (lv 1)]

[Tinker Perk Obtained! Diagnose Problem]

[Skill Level Up! Tinker (lv 2)]

[Skill Level Up! Tinker (lv 3)]

Huh, neat.

With my job done, I turned around and left the apartment, and made my way back to my place. My muscles were aching, and a hot bath would’ve been perfect.

“Hey Mike, where are you going?” shouted a familiar voice.

“Huh?” I turned around to see Hiroi walking up to me with a confused look. “Oh hey, I just finished the job and I’m heading home. Turns out it was her dishwasher that was broken, and I spent the last few hours prying chunks of melted plastic out of it. By the way, you really need to let everyone know that I’m *not* Hank’s replacement.”

“Oh, that explains why she was using the old codeword, sorry about that!” Hiroi scratched his head in embarrassment. “But you can’t go home yet, I got another call! This time about a broken microwave in C313.”

I looked at the Japanese man with dead eyes. I let out one more long sigh. “I’m on it, boss.”

Chapter 19: Defending my new Home

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I eased myself out of my bed and turned off the alarm. The analog clock read seven. With a groan, I carefully made my way to the small bathroom, mindful of how little space there was between the bed and the end table. After brushing my teeth and a quick face wash, I was out and headed towards the kitchen.

Four days. That's how long it'd been since I started the job.

I gulped down the instant coffee and made my way to the small walk-in closet. The space was almost completely bare, unlike the rest of the place, but it held a single large item. I picked up the toolbox and headed towards the front door.

I made my way outside and headed towards the main office. I still didn't have a phone line or cable TV set up yet, so I had to get a list of orders from Hiroi in person. Besides, I'd still need to get the owner's manuals for whatever appliance I had to fix from there, so it wasn't too much of an annoyance. But the lack of TV on the other hand was. I planned to do something about that after today, now that the weekend was about to begin.

"Mike, Mike! How are you, sweetie?"

I turned my head to see a familiar older woman. She was slowly making her way down the sidewalk with a cane, but stopped to wave at me.

"Hi Glinda!" I shouted back. "How's the microwave?"

"Oh, it's wonderful! Everything heats up evenly now, so I don't have to deal with my husband's cooking anymore!"

"Well I'm glad to hear that. Let me or Hiroi know if something else breaks, I'll be glad to fix it."

"Of course! And you should have said something earlier about not being Hank's replacement. I was about to invite you over to fix

something else! Haha!"

I hid the shiver that went down my spine.

"Oh, is something wrong, dearie?"

"Huh? Nothing, I'm just running a bit late is all."

"Then I won't keep you, I'm sure you have plenty of other residents to help out."

"Right, see you later!" I said, waving goodbye to the old lady and continuing towards the office.

Glinda was a nice friend. But it was hard to build on that friendship when an invitation to her place was a coin toss between tea and a threesome. I just had to find someone who had absolutely no interest in me sexually…

"Hey, Mike!" came a gruff shout.

A large man with bulging veins began walking towards me. The last time I'd seen him, he was ready to kill a man. Even without the bloodshot eyes or threatening screams, Harold was still plenty scary enough to make me freeze in place.

"You look like you've seen a ghost!" the large man exclaimed as he slapped me on the shoulder. Hard. "The oven's even better than before! What kind of magic did you work on that old thing?"

"Oh, you know. Just some skills," I shrugged. And Skills. Especially [Tinker]. The [Diagnose Problem] perk let me skip the hard part of finding what was wrong and jump right into fixing things.

"Well that's some damn fine skill!" exclaimed Harold with another slap on my shoulder.

"Take it easy, man," I said with a halfhearted chuckle. "My skin's going to shine red at this rate."

"You know, I'd love to do that, but I've been working nonstop to replace the window that asshole broke, and to get an apology gift for

my wife. I'm hoping that'll cheer her up."

"The asshole?"

"The one who tried fucking my wife."

"Oh yeah, him." I quickly nodded. I wasn't about to correct him on what really happened.

"So yeah, I get that the whole thing only happened because she's been feeling down, so I figure another gift should cheer her up!"

I cleared my throat and thought for a moment before responding. "You know, maybe you should actually take it easy on the job instead? I bet your wife would actually be a lot happier about it."

"Huh?" Harold looked at me with a strange look. It was equal parts puzzled and frustrated. His grip on my shoulder began to tighten. "Is that some kind of joke? Because I don't think it's very funny."

"No, really!" I raised my hands to placate him. "I remember her saying that she was lonely, that she didn't get to spend enough time with you."

"I don't know…" His grip loosened, but I could still feel the pain.

"Look Harold, I *know* you two truly love each other, and each others' company would be a greater gift than *anything* money can buy! Just try it out, maybe take a day off and spend it with her, just to see how she feels?"

My shoulder felt like it was about to be pulled out of its socket, or crushed to pieces. But all of a sudden, Harold let go and the pain disappeared.

"Hmm, I guess it's worth a try. Thanks Mike, I'm glad I can trust you." Harold gave me another slap on the back and walked off back to his place.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I'm probably the least likely person in the entire *world* to fuck your wife."

I felt a cool breeze blow across my face. “And that probability is zero, by the way.” I quickly added.

I turned around and continued back towards the office. My mind soon began to wander towards the kind of work I’d be doing today.

Most of what Hiroi assigned me was pretty standard, and I was starting to get the hang of fixing the most common problems. Clogged toilets, dryers filled with too much lint, and shorted out microwaves. Those weren’t always the only problems, however. Especially with the microwaves.

One man tried heating up a fleshlight in his, and it exploded. Thankfully he hadn’t used it first, but it took almost as long to clean out as Becky’s dishwasher did, and I almost told that guy he should’ve just microwave his dick instead. The only reason I held my tongue was because I leveled up in [Tinker] right after.

That was the weird thing about that Skill. It worked on just about every kind of machine, but it seemingly only leveled up when I fixed something with a clearly sexual purpose, or sexual-adjacent. Becky’s dishwasher was used to clean her collection of sex toys, and the other guy’s microwave was being used to warm up his.

One of the books I’d gotten from the Newark library said that leveling up was absolutely trivial at early levels, that it would take less than a week to reach level 10 in just about anything! But I was only at level 4 in almost all of my Skills despite having them for much longer. In fact, my main level was also stuck in place!

I guessed that the System just didn’t deem what I was doing as worthy of leveling. Being an apartment complex’s resident handyman was apparently too boring for it.

I looked up at the sky and let out a long, raucous laugh. “Like I give a shit! I’m happier than I’ve ever been!”

One person saw me and gave me a strange look. I glared back at him and he quickly ran away. I knew his secret, so if he tried spreading any rumors about me being a weirdo, he knew I’d let word of his microwave incident slip.

But really, I was happier than I ever have been in my life. I'd fight to keep things as they were.

I continued onward, and it didn't take me much longer for me to reach Hiroi's office. The door was locked, so I knocked on it. No answer. I knocked again and double checked the hours listed on the window. 6 am - 3 pm. The old man was a hard worker, waking up bright and early every morning. If he wasn't there, maybe something was wrong…

"Oof!" came a shout from behind me. I turned around and looked around for its source. "Aah!" it came again. My ears traced it to the walled off section that housed the dumpsters.

I dropped my toolbox and ran towards the sound. There was no mistaking it, that voice belonged to Hiroi.

I turned the corner and entered the secluded area, slamming into the wall to stop my momentum. Inside, amongst the dumpsters, was my boss. He was keeled over, arms grabbing at his stomach. Standing over him was a man in a gray pinstripe suit, purple tie, and white fedora.

"C'mon old man, I didn't even hit ya' that hard!" the strange man said with a strong New Jersey Italian accent. He had a toothpick between his teeth. He lazily turned his head towards me and gave me a frown. "And who da hell are you?"

Chapter 20: An Offer I Can't Refuse

"What da hell are ya talkin' about, old man? You can't pay up? What da hell do we do for you?!" shouted the strangely dressed man. He had a suit, dress pants, and fedora of various shades of gray, along with a purple tie.

"Please, you increased the price tremendously since last time, I'm not ready to pay it!" pleaded my boss. He had both of his hands clasped together, and despite his eyes being entirely covered by his hair, I could make out a look of desperation on the rest of his face.

"Bullshit! And after all we've done for ya?!" the suited man shouted. He raised a fist and rammed it into Hiroi's stomach.

Hiroi took the hit and fell to his knees.

"Hey!" I shouted, walking in front of the two. "What the hell's going on here?!"

"Eh? Who da hell are you?" The strange man took the toothpick out of his mouth and tossed it to the ground beside Hiroi.

"The handyman," I replied, taking a step towards him. "And that's my boss you just punched."

"Oh, a tough guy!" he replied with a crooked grin. "I'd call ya cute, but then I'd be lying. So why don't you *actually* be handy and fuck off?"

"Why don't you?" I immediately shot back. My heart began to beat faster, and red started filling the sides of my vision. "I'll give you a chance to get lost before I rip your tongue out of that ugly mouth of yours with my teeth. No wait, what am I saying? I'm going to do that right now!"

"Wait, Mike! Don't!" exclaimed my boss.

I took only a single step before ice immediately filled my veins. It wasn't because of Hiroi's words, however. The strange man in front of me swept open his jacket and revealed a holstered pistol that his

hand was already on. I came to a standstill.

“Oh Hiroi, what’s the cost for giving me lip?”

“T-ten percent,” the old man said in a whisper, slowly getting back to his feet.

“Good, so you do remember! And that’s on top of the money you already owe us.”

“But I can’t afford it! You just raised the price all of a sudden today, do you think raising it even more is going to get you everything when I never even had enough for *this*?”

“And that’s another ten percent, old man!” The man in the suit let out a laugh. “But you have a good point about not being able to pay if your bill keeps going up, so I’ll just have you pay this way instead!” He threw another blow into Hiroi’s stomach.

My boss screamed as he collapsed to the ground. He was conscious, but gripped his stomach in pain.

My vision began to blur, but the gun always stayed in focus. I so badly wanted to draw blood, make this utter piece of shit *suffer* for finding enjoyment in brutalizing an old man, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know *whose* blood would be drawn if I tried.

The rage from my inaction soon began to overflow my head, and something strange happened. I didn’t go berzerk or seize over. I just went numb. Numb enough to try something else out.

“Could I ask who you are, then?” I asked. I felt raw Charisma flow out of my lips, aided by the System. “I just started yesterday, and nobody’s told me what’s going on.” It took a surprising amount of willpower not to sneak an insult into my question.

“Who me? Why, I just repruh-zent a real-estate protection agency, is all,” he said with a smug grin. “We keep these businesses safe and all dat. You knows, from hooligans or any ne'er-do-wells.”

“In a suburb.” It wasn’t a question.

“You never know when you’re gonna need it.” His smile turned sadistic.

The Charisma dropped from my voice and the words on my mind came out as they were. “You’re the fucking mob…”

“Bingo! We’ve got a smaht one here! Though we prefer the term ‘protection agency’, I already told ya that. Now, about your boss’ payment.”

Hiroi was still on the ground. He’d stopped writhing, but he lay still, unable to get back up.

“He said he’s unable to pay because of the sudden price increase.” I said, channeling the System again. “Would it be possible to delay the increase until the next collection?”

“Hmm, I guess I could delay it, but there’s still one more matter.”

“And what would that be? I’m sure we could come to a friendly arrangement.”

“He still owes me another ten percent because of *your* lip! Talking like you could take me? Ha!”

I froze. Me and my fat mouth.

“But you do look like you could take a punch from me, so that’s outta da question. Oh hey, Hiroi here’s Japanese, right? Don’t they’ve got some kinda special apology dance or something? What’s it called? Oh yeah, Kowtow!”

“Urf, Mike,” groaned my boss. “You don’t… have to…”

“On yer fuckin’ knees, twerp!”

My eyes shifted between the two. Hiroi was still on the ground and the goon’s hand was still on his gun.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I lowered myself to my knees.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it? But that’s only step one. Now on your hands.”

I glared at the dirty ground and did as the man asked. Every fiber of my being wanted me to lash out, to strike at the first bastard I’d met who *truly* had everything coming to him. Even Jeff from back in Edison was just a common fuckboy, but this man…

“Hmm, nice, nice. I like this, no wonder youse Japs made this a thing! Now kiss my foot.”

“That’s not part of it,” growled Hiroi. Anger shone through his pain.

“Don’t care, I’m making the rules! Now kiss ‘em.”

I slowly lowered my head, using all of my willpower not to spit on his feet instead. As I got close enough to make contact, the goon quickly raised his right foot and placed it on top of my head. He pushed down and forced me to the ground.

“Nah wait, I have a better idea. Why don’t you lap up some garbage water?!” He began to laugh. “Like some kinda fuckin’ garbage dog! Woof woof, drink up, bitch!”

The numbness in me grew deeper. Neurons in my brain began wildly firing in some attempt to make sense of how I could be feeling such sheer rage yet not be doing anything about it. One of those neurons happened to be linked to the System.

[Revenge] active.

Oh right, I got that Skill after beating up Jeff. I’d forgotten about it after that incident, since there wasn’t anyone here I really had anything against. Until now.

A minor tingling sensation filled my body. It was unlike the cold rage I was already feeling, but rather focused. Refined. The Skill filled me with both the physical deftness and determination to make the man above me suffer. And I was about to.

My eyes quickly darted to a piece of moldy cheese that must’ve fallen out of someone’s garbage bag. I expertly picked it up with the tips of

my fingernails and slapped it onto the goon's pants. He didn't notice. He was too busy laughing.

The Skill was happy.

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 2 -> 3]

An old cigarette butt caught my attention next. I picked it up and slid it inside the man's sock. I somehow *knew* he was allergic to the stuff in it and would get a nasty rash.

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 3 -> 4]

[Revenge Perk Obtained! Minor Inconvenience]

What the hell? I forcefully turned the Skill off. What kind of revenge was *this*? Messing up the guy's pants with moldy cheese? Oh yeah, that *totally* makes up for him kicking my head into garbage water and beating up an old man. I bet that dry cleaning bill would *totally* bankrupt him.

"Haha! Wooh, yeah. Alright, I've had my fun, but I need to get going." The goon lifted his foot from its resting place and began to walk away.

I turned my head and looked back at him. As disappointed as I was from how [Revenge] turned out, that distracting emotion didn't entirely displace what I was feeling before.

I could see a thick envelope in his back pocket. No doubt Hiroi's payment.

"*Fuck it,*" I thought to myself as I focused the Skill on him once more. [Revenge: Minor Inconvenience].

Rather than the envelope flying open or exploding into a shower of bills, the wallet in his other pocket fell out instead.

The mobster didn't notice, and continued on his merry way.

"Mike, are you alright?" asked Hiroi, rushing over and helping me up.

“Yeah,” I replied, shaking my head. “Wait, I should be the one asking *you* that.”

“Oh, well when you’ve been through everything I have, you learn how to take a punch without getting hurt. It makes people you’ve pissed off leave you alone faster.” He gave me a wink. “And it looks like I’ve satisfied him enough to leave us a present.”

I quickly forgot about my boss and walked over to the fallen wallet. Seeing that its owner was long gone, I picked it up and began rifling through its contents. Inside was what anyone would expect; a driver’s license, a few dollar bills, and various business cards. One of them in particular caught my eye. A customer card for a casino, Victoria’s Garden. It was a rewards card, and had quite a lot of wear.

“So we’ve got his name,” I said, putting most of the cards back. I stuffed his cash into my pocket. “Should we call the cops?”

“Nah, they won’t be able to do anything.” Hiroi shook his head. “The police used to have them under control, but something changed a few months ago and they’ve been running rampant ever since. I really don’t think I can keep paying them at the rate things are going.”

My arms fell limply by my side. Whatever disappointment from that petty retaliation morphed into a rage that burned even brighter than before. I clenched my teeth as I gripped the wallet with enough force to tear it apart, if it weren’t for the high quality of its leather.

“M-Mike?”

“They need to pay. This is *wrong*.” My voice dropped down to a seething whisper. “I’m going to make the mob burn.”

Hiroi reflexively took a step back when he saw me. “I know you’re angry, Mike. But don’t do anything you’ll regret. Whatever you do to that man will come back to you, to us, ten fold! Take the day off if you need to, but do **not** go after him!” He all but shouted those last words.

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” I said, walking away from the dumpsters. “But I hope you don’t mind if I start moonlighting.”

“I don’t, as long as you can still keep up with *this* job. But why do you need another one? Is it the pay here?”

“That’s not it, Hiroi. You pay very generously. I just need more… experience.” I was soon out of earshot. “I need a job that’ll actually get me some levels.”

[Level Up! (5)]

[Str: +1 | Con: +2 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +1 | Int: +2]

[Str: 13 | Con: 14 | End: 13 | Cha: 17 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 13 | Int: 15]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 4 -> 5]

Chapter 21: Hitting the Strip

I wasn't an idiot. I wasn't going to charge into a mob headquarters and get gunned down like some kind of degenerate. So my only hope was hitting them from the side, in places that mattered, like their wallet.

Of course, I had no way to do that either. But what I did have was the System, and that could give me the tools I needed to put a stop to the mob once and for all. The only thing that was missing was a way to level it up.

The harsh smell of the Atlantic City strip hit my nostrils like a wrecking ball. Smog, piss, and cheap perfume danced around the air, defining the culture of the city's nightlife. As much as the bright lights of the various casinos and boutiques worked to distract the hundreds of people walking down the sidewalk, they still couldn't fully cover up the shanty houses and graffiti-covered pawn shops. So just like back home.

I strode down the sidewalk at a quick pace. I took shallow breaths to avoid the worst of the smell, and covered my nose with my shirt when that wasn't enough. I passed by several smaller casinos, not paying them much mind; if I wanted to level up quickly, I'd need to see some *real* action.

The System was really weird like that. It was made for having sex, but I didn't actually need to have sex for it to reward me. Doing anything remotely exciting was enough to get a level up, like getting into a fight, and doing anything even adjacent to sexual would get me a Skill.

But Skills were a different matter. [Tinker] only counted fixing sexual devices as valid experience, but [Detect Cheating] worked with anything that fit the broad definition of "cheating." It honestly made no sense, but neither did the System, if you thought about it. The entire thing felt half-assed in how it worked, but that just meant it was ripe for abuse! Like how the mob abused Hiroi.

"Hey buddy, do you have any change?" asked a man sitting in front

of a sign. He had a scraggly beard of black-gray hair and wore a red beanie and a worn gray sweater with torn blue jeans.

I didn't hesitate as I reached into my pocket and gave him a fiver I pinched from the mobster.

"Wow, thanks man," he said in a hoarse voice. He smiled, but ruffled his eyebrows when he looked up at me. "But why the long face? If you have money to give, then you probably didn't lose everything at the slots."

"Huh? No, I haven't been gambling. I'm just… disappointed by this place, I guess."

"By this shithole? Say it ain't so!" He let out a raspy laugh. "But it honestly used to be much better. Not by much, but still better, at least before the mob rolled in a few months ago. Those assholes are why I'm out here!"

I looked at the man with wide eyes. I reached into my pocket and handed him another twenty.

"Woah, you don't need to give little old me all of this!"

"Hey, you're not their only victim," I replied. "Take care of yourself, and hopefully the mob won't be a problem for much longer."

I turned around and found exactly what I was looking for. There was a sprawling casino covered in blaring lights, with the name "Zane's" barely visible in the cacophony of light. Everything about it, the din, the throngs of people coming and going, and the absolutely awful taste in the signage. I knew this place would be exciting enough to get some levels.

"Hey man, I have no idea what you're talking about, but good luck!"

I looked back and nodded, before making my way inside.

The signage outside didn't do the place justice, or rather, warn me hard enough. Bright strobe lights covering the full rainbow bore down on me and everyone inside. Bass-boosted beats from the dozens

of subwoofers shook my innards. Rows of slot machines and roulette tables were filled with throngs of men and women, all focused intently on the spinning wheels before them, while wait staff walked between them in revealing outfits.

I took a deep breath. Not that I felt the air coming in and going out with how the music throttled my lungs. But if any place was wild enough to please the System, it was here.

I puffed out my chest and strode over to the front counter.

“Welcome to Zane’s Garden!” mumbled a woman I could barely hear over the din. She was dressed in a leather bunny outfit she didn’t look very comfortable in.

“Hi! I’m looking for a job!” Not to let anything go to waste, I channeled my Charisma Attribute and let its power flow through my voice. “I’m really good at catching cheaters and would be a great security asset.”

“Huh, what was that sir? You’ll have to speak up, please.” She turned her ear towards me and nodded apologetically.

“I’m looking for a job!” I shouted back, cupping my hands around my mouth. “As security!”

“Security, eh?” She looked at me from head to toe, diligent eyes taking in every detail. Whatever the woman saw, she liked, because she flashed me a demure smile. “I think we might have a position available, so please follow me.”

She opened the counter’s divider and led me through the back door into a sterile hallway surrounded by white paneling on all sides. As the door closed, we were left in complete silence.

“That’s better,” the woman sighed. “Let’s get you a form to fill out, and you can start-”

“Who’s that you’ve got there, Anna?” came another voice from around the corner. A woman in an ink blue suit and pencil skirt slowly strutted over to us, sizing me up all the while. Her presence filled the entire room, and even if we were out on the casino floor, I

was sure she'd still be the center of everyone's attention. Still, something about her grabbed me the wrong way.

"Oh! It's a new employee, Mrs. Fleming," replied the first woman as she pulled at her outfit. "For an open security position."

"Please Anna, just call me Ivy. *Miss* Ivy," said the formal newcomer in a slow and sensual drawl. "Now, mister…"

"Smith. Mike Smith," I said, slowly extending a hand.

Ivy took it limply and shook, yet her eyes were locked intently on mine. "I see, Mr. Smith. I'll just call you Mike, how about that? I'm sure my husband, Zane, would love to have you along, and as his second-in-command, it will be my pleasure to… sign you on. Please follow me to my office."

I slowly nodded and did as asked. I could've sworn I heard Anna let out a snicker right before I was out of earshot.

I entered the small office after Ivy, who promptly closed and locked the door.

"Alright Mike," she said with a growing smile. "Now I'm going to have you strip."

"E-excuse me?" I replied, slowly turning around to meet the forceful gaze of the woman. I took a step back when her smile began to show teeth. "Is that necessary for the position?"

"It is if you want to work under me. But don't worry, I'll join you." Ivy began to unbutton the white blouse under her suit.

"I guess this place doesn't have much of an HR department, then?" I asked with a chuckle.

"I *am* the HR department," Ivy replied deadpan.

"Of course you are."

"So are you going to start stripping or what? Not much of a go-getter if your boss has to do all the work."

“Hold on. First I have to know if this is a regular thing,” I asked while crossing my arms.

“For all our male employees, yes.”

“And the female employees?”

Ivy sneered at me. “I’m not into women, and Zane knows better than to try anything with other women while I’m around.”

“Alright, but is this a regular *occurrence*?”

“Of course,” replied Ivy with a wry grin. “We have all sorts of mandatory uniform inspections, and pleasure tests. Don’t worry, you won’t be excluded.”

I let out a long, drawn out sigh. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

“What do you mean?”

“So on top of working casino security, you want me to be your little boy toy?”

“That’s right, aren’t you glad?” She winked.

Ivy had a presence that would make almost any man, or woman, happily kneel before her. But right now, the only thing in my gaze was a baleful determination. I was here to get strong so I could draw blood. I was here out of pure spite.

“Am I at least getting paid extra?” I asked, a single eyebrow cocked.

“You get the opportunity to work at the most famous casino on the Atlantic City strip!” Ivy replied, affronted. “*That’s* your payment.”

“Oh no, you don’t!” I shouted back. “You’re not selling me on extra work with fucking ‘prestige’. I’m a security guard, not desperate!”

“Well no wonder you’re looking for a job!” Her rage transformed into haughtiness. “You won’t get far in life with a negative attitude like that!”

“Well I’m not interested in going wherever your so-called ‘positive attitude’ will take me.”

I stormed over to the door and let myself out of the woman’s office, making my way back to the main floor and finally outside.

It looked like Zane’s casino was a bust.

Chapter 22: Employer Interference

“Damn, looks like things didn’t go so well?” asked the scraggly man sitting in front of Zane’s casino. “Lose all your money? I could give you back the twenty if you really need it.”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” I replied with a drawn out sigh. “I just went in there for a job interview, and things didn’t go so well.”

“You flunk out that badly? You weren’t even in there for that long, that must’ve been a sight!”

“Excuse me?” I glared at the man, but my look eventually turned sad. “Nah, the interviewer just wanted to have sex with me.”

“Well that doesn’t sound so bad-”

“On top of doing my actual job.”

“Yeah, then I can’t blame you. But if she’s pretty enough, I’m sure most guys would be into that.”

“You should’ve seen her, they totally would,” I explained, remembering the presence she had. “Honestly, if it were just a date or something, and she wasn’t such a…”

“A bitch?”

“I was going to say ‘married’, but yeah, that too.” I let out a short chuckle. “If it weren’t for all of that, I’d consider it.”

We stood there in silence for a few seconds.

“Hey, what’s your name? I’m Mike, by the way.”

“You can call me Samuel, or Sam for short.”

I nodded. “Hey, thanks for taking my mind off things, Sam. It helps a lot.”

“Sure, no problem!” He let out a hearty laugh. “And if you can’t find

a job in time, I'll save you a spot next to mine!"

"Hey!" shouted a woman from the front of the building. "You won't need that spot if you come with me!"

The two of us looked to see the lady who was manning the counter, Anna, run up towards us. She was still wearing the leather bunny outfit, but had a crop-top and shorts over it. Her previously demure expression was gone and replaced with sheer, brazen confidence.

"Mike, right?" she asked, pointing a finger right at my face. "Sorry about that whole business back there with Ivy, but I think I've got a position for you!"

"Sorry, but I'm not interested in working at a place where HR doesn't actually help the employees." I crossed my arms and frowned. Wait…

"I don't mean at Zane's," she said with a pout. "I mean at the Bear's Den!"

"But don't you work here? Why are you trying to get me to work for a rival?"

"Well, I only work here on paper." She flashed me a mischievous smile and leaned in to whisper. "But truth be told, I actually work for Mr. Petrovich, Zane's competitor. He just put me up here to start trouble by hiring bad employees."

"Hold on," interrupted Sam from his spot on the ground. "Weren't you trying to hire Mike here just a minute ago? Either you've got bad judgment, or you're still pulling his leg."

"I'm sorry, who's this?" Anna pouted.

"Sam, he's a friend of mine," I rebutted. "And he's got a point."

She looked at the two of us for a second before rolling her eyes. "You're not bad-bad, but bad for the management. It's because you're Ivy's type."

"You're going to have to explain," I said with crossed arms.

“If you haven’t noticed, Ivy and Zane don’t actually do any managing, and just try to have their way with the employees. So my *actual* boss figured that he should help them out by having me hire the best himbos and bimbos I can find!”

“And you thought I was a himbo?”

“With the way you just walked in there and demanded a job without giving me a resume or talking about your qualifications, sure!”

“How the hell was I supposed to talk about *anything* in there when I couldn’t even hear myself?”

“Touche, but you did prove me wrong when you chewed Ivy out like that! Man, she was pissed, it was hilarious! Too bad I couldn’t laugh in her face, but it was *so* satisfying to see in person!”

I looked at the woman as she broke out into a fit of laughter. “That’s actually pretty clever, handing your enemies a noose to hang themselves with. But also really scummy.”

Anna simply shrugged and kept on laughing.

“You know, that *is* pretty smart. And someone like Ivy absolutely deserves it!” I clapped my hands together. “Alright, I’m sold on your boss!”

Anna calmed herself down with a deep breath. “I’m glad you’ve seen the light! I can give you a reference and get you a real interview if you come with me right now. And Sam, you’ve got enough backbone for a place at the Bear’s Den too. I can come back to pick you up later.”

“No thanks,” replied the vagrant. “I swore I’d never step into a casino again.”

“Oh well. Come on, Mike. I don’t have all day!” Anna yelled as she began to jog away down the street.

As I began to follow, Sam shouted back at me. “If you want a casino that’ll actually treat you well, try Goldshanks’! And whatever you do, stay away from Victoria’s Garden!”

While I took his advice to heart, I already had a guaranteed interview. And besides, I could head there next if things didn't go so well at the Bear's Den. I simply nodded back and ran after Anna.

"Wait up," I said, panting for breath while trying to keep up.

"Come on, I'm not going that fast!" replied Anna.

"No, not like that. I wanted to ask." I let out a wheeze. "Wouldn't Zane try to take advantage of you if you're working there? How do you put up with it?"

"I don't! Zane and Ivy have a deal where they come in on alternate days so they can get away with cheating on each other, and I only work when Ivy's in."

"But wouldn't one of them have figured it out by now? I mean, them both doing the same thing but not suspecting their spouse; what are the chances?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure deep down they both know what's going on, but neither wants to ruin what they have going for them. So it's like a mutual secret."

I let out another pant as Anna continued to speed up. "They sound like idiots. How have they not gone bankrupt yet?"

"They inherited the place from Zane's father, who used to be a legend, so losing all of that money has been a challenge. That's why my boss is having me help them!" The woman planted her feet into the ground and quickly skidded to a stop. "Speaking of which, we're here!"

It took me another quarter of a block to slow down, and even then, I almost tripped. Several passersby gave me weird looks, but I ignored them.

"Come on, what are you waiting for!" Anna cheered as she ran inside.

I let her go ahead as I took in the building's facade. Unlike Zane's casino, the Bear's Den was much more humble in its signage. It still

made heavy use of neon lights, but what casino didn't? It featured a simple bear's head over a roulette wheel. An open bear trap hung right below it. How fitting.

After catching my breath and trying to air out the sweat stains on my armpits, I headed inside. Petrovich was much smarter than Zane or Ivy, and the kind of man who could provide a real challenge. One that would let me properly level up.

Chapter 23: Into the Bear's Den

The inside of the Bear's Den was completely at odds with Zane's Garden. Rather than flashy lights and deafening music, the casino was dressed up as a comparatively humble hunter's lodge. Emphasis on comparatively.

The bold crimson carpeting and bright, faux-wood paneling along the walls gave off a strong artificial feeling, contrasting with the decorations densely scattered over both. Various stuffed heads were mounted on the walls, from American moose to African lions. There was even a bear-skin rug sitting on the carpet, head and all!

I slowly made my way to the counter, my eyes never breaking from the rug's own soulless sockets. A coppery smell strong enough to taste pervaded the air as rows of patrons silently pulled on slot machines or sat around rustic wooden tables with card-filled hands, making it hard to not bump into any of them on my way past.

"You sure take your time, Mike." Anna was standing by the front counter, her face in a pout. She turned to the older woman sitting on the other side and gave her a thumbs up. "This is the guy I was talking about, Olga! He made Ivy steam up so badly I almost started laughing in front of her!"

"You wish for us to hire a man who almost broke your cover?" asked Olga with a strong Slavic accent. She regarded me with her permanent scowl.

"Yeah!" exclaimed Anna. "There's no way he's going to be let back into Zane's, so what's the problem?"

The attendant looked back over to me and sized me up. After several seconds, she spoke. "And what will we be hiring him for?"

"Security," I replied. "I'm an expert at catching cheaters."

"Front or back?"

"Huh?"

“We’re understaffed,” Anna interjected. “He’ll have to do both.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about, but security was security.

“Very well, then,” said Olga. She looked back at me. “Then find me a cheater.”

I stumbled. “L-like, here? As in right now?”

“Yes, this is your interview. Find me a cheater.”

I looked over to Anna, who shrugged. “I said I’d get you an interview, and here it is!”

“Well, alright,” I awkwardly replied, turning to face the crowd. On the bright side, there being an actual interview probably meant they were interested in my skills, and not my body. “Hold on, how do you know there even *is* a cheater here? What if I can’t find any because there aren’t any?”

“Why would we need someone to find cheaters when there aren’t any?” Olga deadpanned back.

“Fair… I guess.”

The casino’s patrons all looked unassuming for nighttime gamblers, their bored eyes focused on the cards in their hands or the spinning wheels before them. None of these errant souls came off as cheaters to me, but I wasn’t exactly an expert on the subject. [Detect Cheating], however, was. I closed my eyes and looked inwards, before flipping the mental switch to enable the Skill.

Ten seconds.

Ten seconds was how long I lasted before shutting it down with a loud scream. I was clawing at my scalp by the end of it, with my eyes widened and lips parted to reveal a row of hatefully gnashing teeth.

It was like feeling all of the scorn, hate, and loathing of someone who absolutely hated you all at once. Times a thousand. Seriously, what the hell happened there?! The feeling was nowhere near as bad last time!

“Did you stub your toe?” asked the attendant. “We don’t need such a crybaby here.”

“No, I’m just… getting myself excited is all. Helps me focus.”

She shrugged and went back to watching me work.

Anna tried to give me an encouraging smile, but she couldn’t hide how weirded out she was.

While I kept myself from strangling the nearest person for those ten seconds, I was able to at least worm out a lead. Most of the negative pressure was coming from below me, underneath the floor, but there was a pair of strong pulses coming from two gamblers in particular. I looked at them, a pair of men wearing cheap Hawaiian shirts, sunglasses, and fedoras, and tried to piece together what the Skill was trying to tell me.

Detect Cheating (lv 3) **Target** Jack Brown
Detect Cheating (lv 3) **Target** Ronald Chen

I stumbled backwards as the names flowed over my field of view, surprised at the unprompted System notification. That must’ve been what the [Information: Cheater] perk I unlocked some time ago was. The only problem was, I still didn’t know *how* they were cheating.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long for me to figure it out. My eyes felt like they were guided down Jack’s arm, where I saw a card sticking out of his sleeve that matched the ones the casino was using. Ronald, though, was a bit tricker. My eyes just rested on the blackjack player’s head, and chances were, he was just counting cards. There was no way to prove it though, but hopefully finding one cheater would be enough to get hired.

“Those two,” I said, turning to the attendant. He’s got cards up his sleeve and the other’s probably counting.

“Very well, then,” said Olga, pressing a button on her desk and whispering into the adjacent microphone. “Send security, we have a

pair in need of *punishment*."

I shuddered at the giggle Anna let out, but was soon distracted by a trio of large men dressed in cheap suits who exited from the back door. They quickly surrounded the two cheaters, grabbing and dragging them through the same entrance.

"It looks like you have promise yet," said the attendant with the beginnings of a smile. "Though you still need to prove yourself in the back. Anna, you will conduct the next stage of his interview."

"Sure thing!" she exclaimed, jumping off her seat on the counter and heading around to the back. "Come on Mike, if you lose me again, security will just throw you out."

I jogged up close behind her and followed her through the same door the guards went through.

Chapter 24: Jailbreak

The two of us entered another bright, color-bleached hallway with an elevator at the end. As we made our way down the corridor, we passed by an open office door. Inside was a balding middle-aged man with short-cut blonde hair, who was sitting in a push chair in front of a richly stained wooden desk.

His face was clay chiseled with a scalpel, every corner looking as if it were carved with purpose. His eyes cut anyone he looked at with the same sharpness. He blankly stared at another man dressed in a white suit whose back was bent and arms clasped pleadingly.

“Please, Kozakov, I’ve been bad, I’ve been bad!” whined the suited man.

The other man, Anna’s apparent boss, looked unimpressed. “That is Mr. Petrovich to you.”

“I need to be punished, Mr. Petrovich! Please!”

Mr. Petrovich let out a short exhale and looked the man in the eyes. “If you want to be punished, go bother Goldshanks.”

“Goldshanks?! But he doesn’t punish cheaters like you do, he’s no fun!”

“Go do what you did to get punished here, and I’ll see to it that you will be treated properly.”

“Oh thank you, thank you!” The man bowed his head before turning around and running out of the office and clipping my shoulder.

“Hey, watch it!” I shouted at him.

I looked back into the office, and saw Mr. Petrovich staring back at me. I saw memories of death in his eyes. I shivered.

“If you didn’t want to be hit, you shouldn’t have been eavesdropping,” snarked Anna.

“Y-yeah, sorry.” I nodded and kept walking towards the elevator.

We entered the lift and went down several stories into the basement. I kept silent the whole ride down, still intimidated by Anna’s boss. The automatic doors opened after what felt like several minutes to reveal another hallway stained in a bleak red light.

“Alright, so the basics,” said Anna, turning to face me. “Unlike other casinos, we handle punishing any cheaters ourselves so they’re less likely to do it again. We’ve got some of the lowest rates for repeat offenders!”

I nodded as I started putting the pieces together. Something wasn’t right, though. The harsh red lights, the almost secret basement hundreds of feet underground, the scary Russian boss… this was a torture chamber! The man was probably ex-KGB and literally tortured any cheaters in a secret underground facility. There were probably so few repeat offenders because none of them survived, or couldn’t even pick up their cards after they escaped!

Before I could ask, Anna began taking off her clothes. Her crop-top, shorts, and bunny ears hairband were thrown to the ground, and in their place she put on a dark leather mask. “At least changing into my actual work clothes is pretty easy!”

Anna grabbed my arm and led me through one of the metal doors that lined the wall. I was too stunned to fight back and soon found myself inside an enclosed room. Inside was a rack filled with all sorts of strange instruments, from whips to feather dusters. On the far wall were a pair of metal arm restraints built into the wall. They were currently holding two men, Jack Brown and Ronald Chen. They were blindfolded and had ball gags in their mouth.

“Alright, time for your interview!” exclaimed Anna. “Make them hurt, but not too much. It should be fun!”

“Oh my god,” I mumbled to myself. I could feel my shoulders sag. “This is a sex dungeon.”

“Yup! The police will just laugh at anyone who tells them what we’re doing here, because our kind of ‘torture’ is perfectly legal, so we can

get away with it!"

"But they're not consenting," I protested, pointing to the two men bound to the wall. "Doesn't *that* make it illegal?"

"Eh, we have them sign a waiver before we take off their pants. That part's fully consensual, and they don't always take us up on that offer."

"Oh…"

"But most agree anyway because it'll be over faster."

"That's still coercion. It's fucked up to do to someone!"

"They're criminals!" pouted Anna. "Cheating in a casino is a crime, and this is their punishment."

"Cruel and unusual punishment," I shot back.

"Well, that's the job." The dominatrix crossed her arms with finality. "So either you get to punishing them or you're not getting a job."

I went silent. I glared at the woman and slowly trudged towards the rack of torture implements.

"See, now that wasn't so hard, was it? What a good boy!" She let out a giggle.

The objects on the rack barely got my attention. My eyes were focused on the red button above them.

"Hey, what are you doing? Don't press that-"

Before Anna could complete her sentence, I'd already slammed a fist onto the button labeled "release."

The restraints on the two cheaters were released, and they immediately removed their blindfolds and gags before running out of the room.

Anna looked at me with frustration. "I don't think you're really fit for

a job here."

"Me neither," I replied quietly.

The two of us exited the torture chamber and made our way to the elevator. We were stuck waiting for it to come back down, on account of the Jack and Ronald currently riding it up. Anna did make a call for security to intercept them on the way up, however, so my efforts were in vain.

As we stood in awkward silence, Anna sometimes meeting my eyes with a judgmental glare, I started to take in the scenery. There really wasn't much. Dull tiles, red lights, and a heavy lever set into the wall.

It didn't look like a fire alarm, and I saw another smaller red lever some distance back. My eyes widened as I realized what it was.

Anna looked at me with a look of sheer terror and leapt at me. "Don't you **fucking** dare!"

Too late. I'd already ran up to the massive lever and pulled on it with all my might.

A blaring alarm rang out for a second, and a moment later, men and women ran out of each of the rooms. Seeing the two of us waiting for the elevator, they opted for the emergency stairwell.

"You **asshole**!" screamed Anna. "You just ruined a whole night of fun for me!"

I didn't even respond to her. I just ran alongside the others. "Let's cheese it!"

We made it up about a third of the way before we faced our first bit of resistance. A bouncer, relatively skinny and built like a sprinter, stood before us. The others hesitated, they were tired and scared. I simply walked past them on the wide stairwell and slammed my fist into his gut. He crumpled like a piece of paper.

I turned back towards the others, threw my still clenched fist into the air, and shouted. "Freedom or death!"

They just looked back at me awkwardly. “Uh, I really don’t want to die,” one of them mumbled.

“Ok, fine. Just freedom, then!”

The escapees cheered and we continued up the stairs.

When we reached the top, we were met with the rest of the security force. Ten bouncers, most of them as large as gorillas, and Mr. Petrovich standing tall behind them. The security guards all ran at me.

The rest of the cheaters ran around us and out the door onto the casino floor.

“Fucking traitors!” I shouted as two of the men grabbed at me. Fourteen Strength let me shove one of them off, and a quick shin-kick temporarily disabled the other.

Three more bouncers charged at me, and this time, were able to get me into a lock. I still delivered a debilitating punch to one of them, who collapsed to the ground clenching his eye. It was already beginning to bruise up.

I fought the other two, ready to perform the same move as I did last time, but the first pair had already gotten up and joined the dog pile.

Despite all my strength, I was pinned down underneath them. Only my head was exposed as the four each put their entire weight on one of my limbs.

Mr. Petrovich slowly walked over to me. His eyes were filled with contempt.

“I’m not sorry,” I said to him.

“I know you aren’t,” he slowly said back. “I would *love* to truly punish you, but I believe you will only cause me more trouble as long as you are here. You are hereby banned from my casino, and I will not hesitate to have you *truly* suffer if you set foot here again.”

He leaned over close to my ear and whispered. “They will not find a

body.”

I gulped.

“Remove this trash.”

The four bouncers, each with iron grips on my limbs, carried me through the casino floor and out the front door. With a toss, I found myself flying through the air, and finally on the cold pavement.

The door loudly slammed shut.

I slowly rose to my feet and dusted off my face and clothes, before looking back at the Bear’s Den. I let out a sigh and turned back to the streets. That was the second bust tonight.

I remembered Sam’s words from earlier. All of them.

I slowly began to shuffle down the street with a tired look. But that soon changed as fear and disappointment turned into a slow-burning rage. Third time would be the charm.

Chapter 25: Third Time's the Charm

I trudged through the smoggy Atlantic City streets with my hands in my pocket and head hunched between my shoulders. The few people I walked past gave me plenty of room, and a lost tourist who was considering asking me for directions only got two words in before shutting his mouth and turning around after looking at the contorted scowl on my face.

I was fucking pissed. No surprise after everything that had happened to me, what with two back-to-back interviews straight from the pits of hell. But that last one…

I knew this world had issues, but that was just over the line. Kidnapping people, sexually assaulting them, and having the police laugh them out? Even if the victims were cheaters and grifters, they didn't deserve what happened to them. Nobody did. It was beyond fucked up and I had to do what I did since nobody else would.

My face began to droop like a witch melting in the rain, and I let out a frustrated scream. A few people on the street gave me a strange look, but most went back to whatever they were doing beforehand. Atlantic City was just that kind of place.

Didn't I tell myself that I would stop caring about this world? That the way the people here lived their lives wasn't my problem, that it wasn't worth my time? I was angry at Petrovich and his goons, but… I was more angry at myself. Should I *not* have cared? What kind of a person would I have been if I didn't?!

As the sickly chill air cooled my head, I was able to think a little more clearly. I could have just politely declined the job, added Petrovich to my shit list just under the mob, and taken him on after I was strong enough. I berated myself for not thinking this up beforehand, but not that hard. Burning that bridge with a nuclear bombardment was still the right thing to do… I hoped.

But there was no reason to *not* put that plan into action now. With Petrovich now being number two on my shit list, I only needed to grow strong enough to topple him, and to do that, I needed a job.

It wasn't hard to find Goldshanks' casino. Most of the people on the street knew where it was, and I even passed by the man I saw in Petrovich's office. He was easy to recognize from his shakes, I knew it as a telltale sign of an addict in withdrawal. A bondage sex addict, apparently. Could people even get withdrawal symptoms from a lack of sex? Only in this world.

I silently followed him the rest of the way to our destination.

The building I found myself in front of was as large as the other casinos, but its neon signage was comparatively humble. A consisted of a dollar sign with three vertical lines going through it instead of one, with a yellow coin flying above it in an animated arc, and the name "Goldshanks" written underneath it.

It was basic, to the point, and not trying to show off. I had a different feeling about this place.

I made my way inside and took a deep breath. The smell of chemically cleaned carpets and plastic wallpaper hit my nostrils like a runaway truck…

I lost focus for a second before snapping back.

The smell of the building wasn't terribly harsh, and I even felt somewhat nostalgic. The fuzzy red floors and yellow-diamond wallpaper added to that, doing well to add to the cozy, retro atmosphere. Rows of slot machines lined the walls, and a dozen card tables were arranged throughout the main casino floor, hosting games of blackjack and poker.

I saw the man from the Bear's Den stumble over to one of the tables and start playing. I remembered what he said about this place, how there was "no real punishment or anything fun." Codewords I hoped meant no secret sex dungeons or mandatory employee penis inspection day. The bar was pretty low, but the last two places I interviewed at were elephants in that limbo contest. No wait, wouldn't that place the metaphorical bar high instead?

Detect Cheating (lv 3)
Target Svenge

The man from The Bear's Den was sitting at a poker table with a piece of cardboard poking out of his sleeve that nobody else seemed to notice. I didn't even need to activate my Skill, I had everything I needed to get hired.

I approached the front desk, a fancy wooden counter manned by a lone woman wearing a nice, green dress and a black vest on top with the casino's logo embroidered on the left breast.

"Hello sir, welcome to Goldshanks' Casino, where everyday shines bright! How can I help you?" she asked with a wide, synthetic smile.

"Yes, hi," I replied, returning her smile with my best genuine one, despite my exhaustion. It was already well into the night and I'd gotten into a pretty bad fight. Coupled with how my clothes were a mess after said fight and getting tossed out onto the streets, I wasn't pitching at peak performance. But I still had one advantage.

Raw, magical Charisma flowed into my voice, and I could hear a new level of glibness that wasn't there before. "I'd like to apply for a job as a security consultant. I'm sure your boss would be very happy with the services I have to offer."

"I see. He usually interviews candidates personally, so I'm sure you already have an appointment."

"Oh, no I do not. But the skills I have to offer are exceptional and I have no doubt your boss' time would **not** be wasted with an interview with me," I replied, letting the System guide my words. "I'm sure it won't be much of a problem, though your pretty little head wouldn't und-" I cut myself short.

"What was that?" she asked with a sharp look.

"Nothing, nothing!" I quickly backtracked. "I'm sure I'll be able to get rid of all sorts of problems for him by catching cheaters!"

What the hell was that just now? What kind of shit System considers negging as "above average" rhetoric? Oh yeah, one made just to get laid.

"Mmh," she sounded sarcastic, her expression beginning to strain.

“Well I’m sorry, but Mr. Goldshanks is *very* busy, and he doesn’t have time to meet without an appointment. You could make one with me if you’d like. How does next month sound?”

My eyebrows shot up before I could do anything to control the surprise. I sighed as I rested my forehead in my right palm.

“I guess that doesn’t work for you?” she asked with a smug grin. “I mean, unless you can catch one of *them*, then I don’t think you’ll be getting your appointment any time soon.”

I saw the woman point to the far wall behind her, and my final chance rested squarely at its center.

“Well, the meeting actually concerns the man over there,” I said, pointing towards a row of unflattering mugshots with the word “Banned” slapped over them. Even though he looked quite different from the man I’d followed here, his name was the exact same. Donald Svenge.

“What about him?” asked the attendant, slightly disinterested.

“He’s here right now,” I replied, pointing my thumb behind me. “I’m good at catching cheating, and he’s doing it right now at the poker table. That guy right there.”

“…yeah, that does kind of look like him. Shit.” The lady groaned and pressed a button by her side. She spoke into what must’ve been a microphone hidden in the counter. “Security, we have an ‘unwanted guest’ at the poker table. Please confirm that he’s one “Donald Svenge” on the banned list and escort him out.”

A trio of muscle-bound men in cheap suits and dark shades exited the back door beside the counter. They weren’t as big as the ones from the Bear’s Den, but the way they handled themselves made me feel nervous about getting into any trouble here. After getting the details from the attendant, and having me point out the cheater, they made their way towards the wayward cardshark.

The cheater immediately jumped in surprise as the freight train of muscle made their way towards him, and dropped his cards while

trying to run. He didn't get far, as the three broke off and grabbed him before he could even get close to the exit.

"He's got some cards up his sleeve!" shouted one of the security guards, holding the man in place with relative ease. "Well well well, Donald. Fancy seeing you here again!"

"Uh, I think you have me mistaken for someone else," he sheepishly replied.

"Oh come on, how could I forget you after you almost scammed us out of twenty grand? Whatever. We're going to confiscate your chips now, and if you comply, we might even go easy on the police report."

Donald pleaded. "The police are nothing compared to what I'm going to get back at-" He stopped mid-sentence.

"Back where?" asked another security guard.

"At The Bear's Den," I said out loud. "Petrovich sent him to start trouble."

"Damn, again? Just find somewhere else to get your kicks, man. Now come on." The bouncer pulled Donald towards the entrance of the casino, simultaneously calling out to the attendant to notify the police.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 3 -> 4]

After the attendant got off the phone with the police, she turned back to me with a strained smile. "You've definitely done us a service, thank you."

"No problem! I'd like to offer even more of these services to your boss, I think he could make really good use of my talents."

"I'll pencil you in for next year then."

"But you said-"

"That was just an exaggeration," the attendant interrupted. "But Mr. Goldshanks is still a very busy man, so you'll have to come back next

m-”

The frown forming on my face froze as her words did.

The attendant looked away from me and put a hand to her earpiece. “Yes sir, we caught Svenge. Yes, some man here pointed him out, but it was probably a fluke.”

Fluke?! Well yeah, finding the cards in Donald’s sleeve sure felt like one.

“No, he’s still here. But are you sure, sir? He’s… but… alright, sir.”

“I hope that’s what I think it is,” I said with a hopeful smile.

“Regrettably so,” she replied coldly. “Mr. Goldshanks would like to speak to you.”

Chapter 26: A Perfectly Normal Interview (no, really)

I stood at the counter triumphantly, barely holding onto a weary smile. The attendant looked back at me with a dour look.

The back door opened up to another woman in the same uniform as the attendant, a well-ironed black dress and green vest. But unlike the previous attendant, this one was actually smiling at me. “Please follow me, sir.”

I nodded and followed the lady through the door behind the counter. She led me to a corridor decorated similarly to the rest of the casino, with the exception of several paintings lining the walls. They were a bit tacky, even compared to the wallpaper, but it was a nice change from the whitewashed hallways of the other casinos. The uniformed lady pointed me towards a large door and motioned me to enter. I nodded once more and did just that.

Inside was a spacious office, featuring more simplistic wallpaper and several pictures of various people. At the very end of the room was a mahogany desk and plush leather chair that was presently empty.

“You must be the man who caught that cheater!” exclaimed a rich, masculine voice to my left. “Please, take a seat.”

I turned to see a trio seated on a large couch, a portly man in a bright white suit flanked on either side by a gorgeous woman, each wearing a sparkling red and blue dress with plunging necklines. The ladies languidly leaned on the man, their heads resting on either one of his shoulders.

“What are you waiting for? You’ve already gotten an invitation!” laughed the man, pointing to another couch across from him.

I settled down into the other three-seater sofa, and carefully regarded my host. He had relatively dark skin, the formations of a pot belly, and a severe case of male pattern baldness. His facial features were puffed up and his overall appearance greatly resembled, to be perfectly honest, that of a pig.

I felt bad for judging him based on his looks, especially since so far, he was miles better than the other casino owners. Thus I simply sat still and listened.

“I’m Damian Goldshanks, owner of this fine establishment. I’d get up to seat you myself, but I’m a little… preoccupied, as you can see.” He looked over to either woman with a sheepish smile, who looked like they had little desire to leave their comfortable positions. “They’re not used to the casino’s night hours yet.”

“Uh, don’t worry about it.” I waved it away with an equally awkward smile. “I’m Mike Smith, by the way.”

“Well Mr. Smith, I must agree. It truly *is* a pleasure to meet you too.” He extended a hand towards me, shifting his arm out from under the weight of the woman on his right.

I took the hand and exchanged a firm handshake, trying my best not to flinch at his vice-like grip. It took even more willpower not to shake my hand as I brought it back to my side. I’d better get a point in Constitution for this.

“I’ll get right to the point, Mr. Goldshanks,” I took a breath and exhaled, warily channeling my Charisma. “Finding cheaters is something I happen to be very good at. If you have an entire wall dedicated to the people plaguing you, then you could use someone like me to suss them out. Lucky for you, I happen to be available for hire. So what do you say? Can we talk about my potential career here?”

Damian Goldshanks regarded me with careful eyes for several seconds, bordering on half a minute. The two women at his side let out a yawn and regarded him curiously, and then me as if they were also part of the interview panel. Who knew, maybe they were? Eventually he exhaled and began to chortle.

“Haha! I like you! You know what you’re about, and you jump straight to the point! So let me do the same.” He had a mischievous glint in his eye.

I kept up my smile, though I was ready to sigh. I knew exactly what

he was about to say next.

“You’ll need an assistant to cover the whole casino floor, so which of these two lovely women you choose?” Goldshanks pointed to the two girls by his side. They gave him a groggy look before turning to me with bright smiles.

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

“That’s right, an assistant! They’d follow you around and you’d have full authority to have them do whatever you want! All to catch cheaters, of course.”

My mouth snapped shut as my eyes began to study the man.

One of the women looked back at the white-suited man and loudly whispered to him. “Daddy, maybe he likes boys?”

“Oh, of course! Mr. Smith here could have one of the bouncers instead, if he’d like.”

He clapped his hand, and a pair of burly men in suits entered the room. They strolled over to the side of the couch, making a show of their biceps beneath the tight silk.

“So what do you say?” asked Goldshanks.

“Well…” I began.

The girl on the left gave me a wink.

“What are their qualifications?” I finally said. “I mean, besides the bouncers being big and intimidating.”

“The ladies are still learning about the casino, so not much. Same with the bouncers, but they sure know what to do after they’ve found a cheater!”

The three men began to laugh. The bouncers kept snickering well after their boss had finished until he gave them each an annoyed look.

“Excuse me, Mr. Smith,” said the woman on the right. Her eyes were opened wide and lips puckered into a pout. “We might not know much, but we’re willing to learn *everything* we can from you. I’m sure you have… plenty to teach.”

I sat for several seconds, considering Damien Goldshanks’ offer. Eventually, I came to a decision. “I’m going to be honest, Mr. Goldshanks, I don’t really need an assistant. I’m more of a solo-act when it comes to finding cheaters. But if you really insist, I wouldn’t mind having someone to bounce ideas off of, so anyone who’s open to talking with me would be fine in that case.”

Everyone by the other couch stared at me slack-jawed. One of the bouncers had to use his hands to close his gaping mouth shut.

“Did I say something wrong? If so, then I’m sorry,” I quickly said, cursing out the System and its Charisma. I didn’t want to get literally thrown out again.

“Holy shit,” the other bouncer whispered. “First guy in a while who doesn’t think with his dick.”

My eyes opened wide and then narrowed into a leer. “You can’t be fucking serious. You want me to fuck someone as part of my interview? Again?!”

“Hold on, again?” asked one of the women, sitting up.

“Yeah, Ivy at Zane’s casino. Every place I’ve interviewed at has made me go through this shit, and I’m sick of it!” I stood up. “If that’s the case, then I’m sorry, but I don’t think this will be a good fit for me. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.” I turned towards the door and began walking.

“Hold it!” shouted Goldshanks. The weight he somehow put into his voice made me freeze, though his next words were less harsh. “You’ve got the wrong idea, Mr. Smith. All I wanted to do was confirm that you aren’t a spy working with one of my business rivals.”

“Say what now?” I turned back around to face Mr. Goldshanks. The

gears in my head started spinning as I put the pieces together. I remembered the man I followed here, the sex addict, and the comment the bouncer made.

“The kinds of people they send my way aren’t the best at… prioritizing, so they stand out like sore thumbs.”

“Wait, so I pass?”

“Indeed you do!” Damian Goldshanks let out a guffaw. There was a twinkle in his eye. “I think this place might just be what you’re looking for.”

“That’s great! So when can I start?”

“Well, here’s the thing.” The air in the room went cold. “You’ve proven you’re not a spy, but I don’t know just how good you really are yet. From what I’ve heard, the man you caught wasn’t even doing that good a job, like he was hoping to get caught. So I want to give you a *real* test. One that will push you or anyone else to their limits, so I can truly see your skill and strength of character.”

I slowly nodded.

“Come back here on Sunday at eleven in the morning for your real interview. Then we’ll see if you really have what it takes.”

That was two days from today, and I’d be off from my other job. I was planning on getting cable and phone lines installed at my place then, but that would have to wait. I steeled my nerves and nodded once more. “I’ll be there, Mr. Goldshanks.”

The owner held out his hand and I shook it once more. “Good, don’t disappoint me, Mike!”

I left the casino and headed straight home to get a good night’s sleep. I had [Detect Cheating] to help me, but I knew deep down that whatever Damian Goldshanks was going to cook up would still give me a challenge. And I’d be ready.

[Level Up! (6)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +2 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +1]

[Str: 13 | Con: 16 | End: 14 | Cha: 18 | Atr: 10 | Dex: 13 | Int: 16]

Chapter 27: I just wanted to cash in my paycheck!

Beep beep beep.

I quickly opened my eyes and jumped out of bed, almost forgetting to turn off my alarm. A quick shower and cup of coffee later, I was already out the door and headed to Hiroi's office.

"Ah, you're up early, Mike!" said my boss with a cheerful smile. He was sitting in his office looking through paperwork.

"Early? Isn't this when I'm supposed to clock in for work?"

"It's Saturday, Mike."

Every muscle in my face drooped. "Oh."

"But since you're already here, why don't you take your paycheck? Here." He pulled an envelope out of his desk and handed it to me.

I slowly walked over to him and took it. "O-oh! Thanks!" I looked over the check and counted the digits. Before a smile could properly form on my face, I felt a pang of guilt. "Hold on, I heard what you said to that mafia guy. If you can't afford to pay him, then I shouldn't be accepting money from you."

"Don't worry about it, Mike!" Hiroi flashed me a smile, but he wasn't looking straight at me. He couldn't. "This amount won't make up the difference. And besides, they'll probably come up with some kind of alternative payment plan. I doubt anyone they're shaking down can afford them, so it's not like they have much choice."

"Right." I hesitantly nodded. "Thanks."

"What for? That's your pay, you earned it!"

I thanked the old man again and made my way out of the office. I had the whole day to myself and not much to do with it, beyond preparing for tomorrow's interview.

"Wait, how am I supposed to cash in a check when I closed my old

bank account?”

I rolled into the parking lot and stopped my car at an open space, getting out and staring at the building before me. The phone book in Hiroi’s office listed several banks, so I’d picked the most generic sounding one and drove on over.

Atlantic City Bank was a peculiar building, in that it was massive yet humble in its presentation. Simple stone stairs led to a plain concrete facade and stainless steel doors that fed into a surprisingly small bank floor.

Off-white tiles covered the main hall, with vomit-green sofas dotting the waiting area as several tellers sat behind a row of wood-paneled counters to the side. The entire building was utterly devoid of customers except for me, resulting in the sensory deprived men and women in uniform staring at me as if they were a flock of harpies who’d spotted vulnerable prey.

The smell of cheap air freshener wafted through the room, causing me to force back a cough as I powered through the respiratory assault and shuffled my way to the first available attendant. A young woman looked at me with a half-hearted smile and addressed me with a nod, ready to take on my request.

“Hi, I recently moved here and I’d like to make an account,” I said with my own polite expression, the spread of my lips making it nowhere near my eyes.

“Of course, sir,” replied the teller, her own friendly grin looking just as shallow. “Could you please provide me with your ID and proof of residency?”

I handed over my driver’s license and one of the forms I’d just filled out at the apartment complex. I simply stared ahead as the young woman began to look at the information and fill out her own set of paperwork.

The lukewarm smile had fallen from her face and was replaced with a diligent frown as she dutifully made quick work of the task at hand.

Soon enough, she was finished handling her side of the paperwork and handed back my documents along with another form I hadn't seen before.

"The last step is for you to fill out this paper, sir. Here's a pen and make sure to print your name in all capital letters in the small square boxes."

"Thanks," I replied nonchalantly as I took the form and began to fill it out with one of the blue ballpoint pens in the plastic mesh cup beside me.

The pen was out of ink. And so was the next pen I fished out. And the one after that.

"Hey, I think all of the pens are-"

The attendant's frown had grown. It wasn't diligent, this was the look of someone who was deeply perturbed by the world around them, someone who'd lost all control of their life. Oh hey, it was like looking into a mirror!

"Uh, is everything alright?" I asked concernedly. As soon as the words left my lips, I knew I had made a mistake.

The woman dropped her voice into a low whisper and leaned over the counter. "It's everything!" she exclaimed. "This job, my boss, and my entire fucking life!"

I looked towards her awkwardly as she began to pour her heart out, not really sure what to do. I still needed an account, and I felt way too awkward to switch counters *now*. And I couldn't tell her I wasn't interested in her problems, especially now that her eyes were beginning to mist over. I mean, I wasn't *that* big of an asshole!

"My boss is demanding my husband have sex with our special clients! He works at a different branch, so we'll both be punished if he doesn't!" she said with a whimper. "Demotions, pay cuts, and bad hours. Or worse!"

"Wh-what?" was all I could muster as a quick response. After taking a second to let my brain reboot, I decided to elaborate on my original

question. “How the hell does your boss get away with something like *that*?! Don’t you have someone else higher up to report her to?”

“You’re pretty innocent, you know? Hasn’t *your* boss tried to have their way with your spouse? It’s a pretty regular thing, and even my boss’ boss is in on it! But… I guess I’m the innocent one for thinking that it wouldn’t happen to me.” The attendant covered her face with her hands as she burst into tears.

“Hey, hey, take it easy,” I replied in my best soothing tone, hovering my hand above her head while making awkward patting gestures. My god, was I really out of my element here. Why couldn’t there be an attribute or Skill for dealing with this kind of shit?

The other attendants simply looked forward despite how the entire bank should’ve been able to hear her. Those bastards.

“Bu-but, there’s one bit of good news,” the attendant continued, removing her tear-soaked hands from her face to look at me. “She said that if I can offer up someone who looks close enough to my husband, she’ll let him take his place!”

“Well, that’s a positive, I guess,” I replied, looking away from her while thinking of what god to start praying to, because after living in this world for a week, I was starting to get good at picking up on these kinds of cues. I knew exactly what she was going to follow that up with.

“And you do happen to look a lot like him.”

Whoop, there it was, baby! So what do I win? A trip to Hawaii? Oh, maybe a brand new sports car! Or how about being cast as the main character in the latest budget porno?

“Do you think maybe you could take my husband’s place? I swear, the special clients are super attractive and definitely would be your type!”

I sighed while mustering my best deadpan, directing it right at the bank teller. It didn’t last long however. Her running mascara and sniffles broke me before I could get a single word out. The straight,

horizontal line made by my lips fell into a frustrated frown and my shoulders sagged in defeat.

“I… I’m sorry. I want to help you, but I don’t really feel comfortable having sex with strangers,” I sputtered. My face contorted into a wince as I braced for her reaction.

Even more tears began to fall from her cheeks. Before she could let out a wail, her eyes widened. She grabbed my cheeks and spun my head to the left to the front door.

“Look!” the attendant desperately squeaked. “That’s one of our special clients! I told you she’s hot! Isn’t she hot?!”

Walking into the bank was a woman holding a briefcase. She wore a familiar gray pinstripe suit, purple tie, and white fedora. She saw me and looked into my eyes while licking her lips. Hers were filled with hunger.

My own eyes widened as I looked at her. I began to shake, but soon took back control of my body. My eyes narrowed into a leer as the woman made her way into the back through a staff-only entrance.

“Wow, you must really be into her!” exclaimed the attendant. She’d let go of my face and I turned back to her hope-filled face.

“So. This is a mob bank,” I said in a staccato whisper, punctuating every syllable as I tightly clenched my fist.

“Y-yeah, it is,” the attendant replied. Her voice had dropped back down to an equally quiet volume.

I was ready to turn around and march out of the building, but the look on the woman’s face made my rage evaporate. But seeing her wipe away her tears with a tissue filled that space back up, but with indignation on her behalf instead.

I barely leveled up since two days ago, and I definitely wasn’t ready to dismantle a fucking mob bank! But I had to at least try. I had to! And to that effect, I had an absolutely insane idea that might not work, but there wasn’t much else of a choice. Let’s fucking go…

I took a deep breath as I directed my indignation into an inquisitive glance focused on the young woman, all of the force of my Charisma gathered behind it.

“I can’t imagine that your other coworkers are fine with this, right?” I asked. “Did they all get blackmailed too?”

“Yeah,” the bank teller replied with a slight nod. “All of us hate it, but there’s nothing we can really do, so we just take it. I mean, we’re on the lowest rung around here, they could easily replace any of us if we decided to quit! I’ve talked to the others on break or outside of work, and *all of us* feel this way.”

A wicked grin began to spread across my face as I looked back at her with sharp eyes. “You know, if *all* of you feel that way, then you have more power than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, if all of you work together, then there’s nothing you can’t accomplish! And since all of you are on the same page about this, doesn’t that just make things easier?”

“E-easier?” asked the teller, hesitation in her voice. I chalked it up to the fear of her employers.

“Of course!” I replied, excitedly. I felt like Newton when he discovered gravity, or the founding fathers when the British surrendered, or even a kid who realized he was getting a new video game for his birthday! The sheer adrenaline flowing through my veins forced my lips to part in an almost manic smile. “But it requires everyone to come together for this.”

“I-I see,” she said, still looking unsure of what I had planned.

“What I need from you is to gather all of the employees and have you all meet together somewhere. Is there some kind of free hall or enclosed space where we could do this?”

“There’s one place I know, let me give you the address. It should be empty tonight.”

“Well that’s convenient! Yeah, this should work.”

“What should we wear?”

“Wear?” I looked at her in confusion before returning a standard response. “I mean, whatever’s comfortable, I guess.”

The teller looked down and blushed slightly. “Of course, what else would we wear?”

She was acting strange, but I put the thought aside as I basked in the joy of showing up the mob for the first time. “Oh! And have everyone bring their spouses!”

“Our spouses?!” she squeaked.

“Of course! Teamwork makes us stronger, right? And your husband also works at the bank too, so it’s especially relevant to him as well.”

“O-of course. Yeah, it *is* relevant to him too, I suppose.”

At this point, I could see the other tellers lean over to listen in to what we were talking about. They also hosted looks ranging from mild concern to great amusement. With what I had planned, that was the kind of reaction I expected.

“Well, that should be everything,” I said with a smile. “Before I get going, could I get some water? I’m really thirsty.”

“Of course!” she repeated once final time, before turning around and heading towards the break room. “It’s the least I can do as thanks.”

“Perfect, thanks!”

As soon as the attendant was out of sight, I grabbed the forms I’d filled out and brisk-walked out of the bank.

There was no way in hell I was handing over my info to the fucking mob like that! I just hoped my sudden disappearance wouldn’t change anyone’s minds about the meeting tonight.

Working together, these bank employees would be able force their

boss' hands and get themselves better working conditions, one free from being used for sex by the mob. And I was going to help them do that, help them *unionize*!

It was only when I was already halfway to my apartment that I realized I hadn't told them what my plan actually was. Oh well, I was sure that Charisma let me tell them everything they needed to figure it out.

Chapter 28: Down with the (horny) bourgeoisie!

I stood inside the phone booth feeling giddy. It took me some time to flip through the pages of the massive yellow book to find the number I was looking for, but it was worth it. It was worth every second spent.

I'd silently declared war against the mob for what they did to Hiroi and I, and I never thought I'd get the chance to do anything about it so soon! The excitement was giving me the shakes, but I forced down the jitters with a deep breath, letting my voice fill with a sense of calm. I dialed the number.

"Hello, Atlantic City Labor Collective, how may I help you?" asked a soft voice from the other end.

"I'm so glad you picked up!" I exclaimed through the phone, enunciating my words with a dramatic flair. "I didn't know who else to turn to!"

"Woah, if it's an emergency, you should call 911," replied the woman from the other end.

"Wha- oh, no! Nothing like that," I said, feeling my cheeks redden. After taking a second to calm myself down once again, I continued. "One of the local banks has been having a lot of trouble with their management and their incredibly toxic policies, so they were looking to unionize."

"That's wonderful! Could you please provide some more information so we can get in touch with them?"

"Yeah, I'm actually the one who convinced them to do this! They're meeting tonight at 8 pm in the Atlantic City public library, conference room 2. Do you think you could send someone over?"

"Of course! It's somewhat short notice, but there are a few of us who are available at that time. I'll pencil someone in to show up then. Thanks again, uh…"

“M-Marty. Marty McSchmiddt.” I wasn’t about to paint a target on my back, no matter how many levels I might gain by the time the mob figured it out.

“Alright then Mr. McSchmiddt, thank you for showing more of corporate America’s workers that they deserve to be treated well.”

The lady hung up.

With a beaming smile, I headed back to my car to grab lunch, and plan out what I was going to say and do at tonight’s meeting.

“Crap crap crap!” I shouted as I tore asphalt on the way to the library.

It was ten minutes to eight, and if I wouldn’t get pulled over, I’d make it right on time.

After finishing the call, I’d gone out for lunch and went to make an account at the local credit union. I eventually came back to my apartment to take a nap, so I could catch up on the extra sleep I missed out on from being up so late and waking up so early yesterday and today. Apparently that nap somehow turned into a several hour long food coma, and I was hauling ass to make up for it.

By some miracle, I made it to the library parking lot completely unmolested by law enforcement. I got out of my car and headed inside the building. It was thankfully easier to navigate than the one in Newark, and I found the meeting spot quite easily.

I let out a sigh of relief when I saw that the meeting was going ahead despite my little stunt that morning. The conference room that the bank teller reserved was quite spacious, with several dozen chairs laid out throughout the hall floor and a small podium standing at the front. The walls and door were soundproofed and entirely opaque, to prevent any loud noises from disturbing the patrons outside.

And the best part, the flooring was entirely made up of incredibly delicate carpeting, probably some kind of velour that was soft enough to have someone be dragged across it at breakneck speeds while buck

naked without suffering even a lick of carpet burn! All in all, it was the perfect place to host a union meeting.

I passed several people, men and women, who looked around the room with a mix of apprehension and excitement. Most of them were wearing trench coats or long overcoats, which was strange as it wasn't *that* cold outside. Maybe they just wanted to dress nicely for the event?

"Mike, Mike!" shouted a familiar voice. The teller who helped me earlier ran up to me with another man in tow. "I'm so glad you made it! I can't believe we're really doing this, huh?" she asked in a frantic, yet excited voice. It was like looking at a young puppy playing with a squeaky toy for the first time.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss this for the world!" I replied with a similar look of elation. "I'll wait for everyone else to arrive, along with a special guest, and then we can get started."

"Ooh, sounds hot! By the way, this is my husband, Rick. He was pretty hesitant about this entire thing, but I was able to convince him to come."

"Well, I'm glad! Nice to meet you, Rick." I held out my hand to shake, which he copied with a limp grip. I frowned. But more so because looking at him felt like I was *actually* like looking in a mirror.

"Oh, Rick, don't be scared," replied his wife. "We'll be together through this, every step of the way!"

I nodded to the two and excused myself. It was good that she realized I was talking about setting up a labor union without me actually having said so. But what else could it have been? I chuckled to myself as I made my way to the podium.

Several more guests had arrived, including the union representative, so I decided to kick things off.

"Hello everyone, members of Atlantic City bank!" I said into the microphone, channeling my Charisma into the device as it

reverberated across the room followed by a staccato static sourced from the relatively primitive sound system.

“Yeah!” shouted the teller, with a fist raised into the air.

“I’m glad you could all make it, and how incredibly brave each and every one of you are for showing up here tonight. But I can assure you, that bravery is about to pay off with the best thing that’ll ever happen in your professional lives.”

“Right, so without further ado, I’d like to introduce-”

Before I could complete my sentence, the teller ripped off her trench coat to unveil a set of incredibly revealing lingerie. Several of the audience members did the same with similar gusto.

I stood in stunned silence as my brain blue screened. If there was a mirror here, looking into it would’ve only showed a ghost. I was pale. I was dead and I was in hell.

The union representative, who was standing behind me, tapped my shoulder and gave me an utterly befuddled glance. So at least I wasn’t the only one.

I turned back to the crowd, made eye contact with the teller, and asked a very simple question in an unnaturally calm voice. “Uh, what the fuck are you doing?”

“We’re doing exactly what me and everyone else came here to do, silly!” she replied exuberantly, the adrenaline that was flowing through her veins making her voice sound shrill. “To take part in the orgy you organized! So that we’d all get comfortable with the idea of having sex with our VIP clients! I mean, that’s what you brought us here for, right?”

I just stared ahead with my mouth open. I could’ve sworn I felt something along my chin, I think it was the floor.

“Right?”

…

…

“Of course not! What the hell made you think I was talking about an orgy?!”

“I mean, you said it like-”

My mind went back to earlier that day, and to the specific wording I’d used, as well as the teller’s reactions. Fine, some of the phrases I used *could’ve* been interpreted that way, but why the hell did she actually *think* I was talking about that? Wait, I didn’t come up with all of those words myself.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Charisma…”

“So what *did* you mean back then?” she asked.

“I was talking about getting you all unionized,” I said slowly, all of my previous enthusiasm long gone. “I even invited a local union representative here to talk you through the process. Hey, rep, do you want to put me out of my misery?”

The man behind me nervously stepped forward and accepted the microphone. The other audience members hurriedly closed their coats over their bodies, buttoning them back up with reddened faces. Apparently, the two of us were the *only* ones who’d come here expecting something *other* than an orgy.

“Thanks Marty,” said the man as he awkwardly looked upon the bank employees. “So, thanks again for being here tonight, everyone.”

Someone in the audience let out a single cough, and the rep gave him a few seconds to let anything else out. It created an awkward pause. I had the urge to start coughing too to cover it up with *something*.

“His name is Mike!” shouted the teller. “M-I-K-E Mike Smith. Where’d you get Marty?”

Well, so much for staying anonymous.

“My mistake! So as *Mike* here told me, you’re all dealing with a terrible work environment that’s been perpetuated by the

management. One of the perks of a labor union is to fight against that kind of thing! Through the power of collective bargaining, we can force their hand and get all sorts of benefits, including a workplace free from sexual harassment."

The members of the audience, finally recovering from their embarrassment, began nodding along to the representative's speech. He went over many fine points about the intricacies of setting up and benefiting from labor unions, most of which I blanked out for.

"And that's about everything you need to know," said the rep, seemingly ready to conclude his speech. "Since unions are all about teamwork, how about a team building exercise before you all get going?"

I considered what we'd all be doing. Maybe one of those stereotypical trust falls that were always shown on TV?

"Since it seems that everyone's already dressed for the occasion, how about an orgy?"

I sat up from my folding chair, eyes bugging out. Son of a-

"Mike, since you're the one who brought us together, how about if you take the lead?" asked the union representative.

I looked at him and then the others, my expression unchanging.

"Yeah Mike!" exclaimed the teller from earlier. "You're the *real* VIP client! Come on down and let us show you a good time!"

You know what? Orgies weren't my thing. I didn't even know any of these people, let alone what diseases they could've been carrying. So it was time for me to make a cool exit.

"You know, I appreciate the spotlight, but this isn't my show," I replied slowly. "It's *yours*. This is your union, I'm just the guy who helped you come together. My work here is done, so I'm going to get going. Good luck with your union!"

Some of the members tried to speak up and get me to stay, but I was out the door before I could hear anything coherent.

As I sat in my car, driving down the moonlit road, I had time to calm my heart to the rhythm of the passing streetlights.

Things kind of went overboard towards the end, and it honestly felt like the world was doing everything in its power now to get me laid. But if it wanted that for me so badly, then it should've sent a woman who was actually single and had more character traits than just being horny. Not that being horny was an actual character trait in the first place.

I looked at the passenger's seat, and the small pile of books lying there. Scholarly articles about the System I'd checked out from the library. A groan escaped my lips.

Whatever. And with the new job I'd hopefully be getting, along with my name on all of the employees' lips, I wasn't going to have much free time, let alone for a relationship.

I clenched my fists around the steering wheel. When this was over, I was going to get that normal life, no matter what it took.

[Level Up! (7)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +0 | End: +0 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +1 | Dex: +0 | Int: +1]

[Str: 13 | Con: 16 | End: 14 | Cha: 18 | Atr: 11 | Dex: 13 | Int: 17]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 5 -> 6]

Chapter 29: Finding life's true meaning in the p*rn cinematic universe

I slowly opened my eyes feeling well-rested. The alarm clock on the bedside table read 7:30 am, which prompted a chuckle from me. It had only been a week, and I was already used to getting up so early.

I quickly got out of bed and turned off the alarm, which wasn't set to ring for another half an hour, and headed to the bathroom to get myself ready. I had a big day ahead of me, after all.

Even though my interview with Goldshanks wasn't until that afternoon, something made me feel that I wasn't ready yet. I needed time to prepare, even if it was just a few hours. All of yesterday disappeared because of the bank union fiasco, and I still somehow slept another full eight hours besides sleeping another six yesterday afternoon. Who knew what the hell was up with this body?

It didn't take long to shave and shower, and drinking my coffee was even quicker. I was out the door before eight o' clock and already hitting the town.

The area around the Atlantic City suburbs were completely different from the inner city. There were still casinos that dotted the streets, but none compared to the sheer size of three I went to yesterday. The city also looked cleaner. Graffiti was limited to small alleyways and the back of dumpsters, and the air actually smelled like air instead of piss.

I made my way down the sidewalk dressed in semi-formal attire. That meant a button-up white shirt, dress pants, and a simple tie. My interview wasn't for a while, but I didn't plan on stopping by my place until it was over.

That meant three hours until my date with destiny. Something about the way Goldshanks talked about it made me believe that it would be the biggest challenge of my life, and I felt a shiver as I recalled his words, his piercing gaze, and his sheer force of will. Maybe he was just good at being dramatic? But I wasn't going to take any risks. I needed to do something to prepare, and there was only one thing I

could do.

I took a deep breath and calmed my mind. The streets were almost desolate, save for the half a dozen or so people up this early on a Saturday. It wasn't much, but I still hesitated as I toyed with the mental switch for [Detect Cheating]. The active form wouldn't be much help alone, since all it gave me was a name. That was why I had to do it.

The world around me went calm and I activated the Skill's passive form. I'd readied my mind for a mental barrage, and that was exactly what hit me. Two seconds was all it took before I turned [Detect Cheating] off, and it was all I needed.

My eyes darted around the street at blinding speed, picking out everyone around me that triggered the Skill, and passing judgment.

Detect Cheating (lv 4) **Target** Kate Weston
Detect Cheating (lv 4) **Target** Mortimer Goss
Detect Cheating (lv 4) **Target** Sherman Powers
Detect Cheating (lv 4) **Target** Ari Fenrisson

A flurry of menus filled my vision. I was somehow able to make out each of them and match it to a person on the street. Their names and their crimes were known to me.

The couple getting frisky with each other in the alleyway over there? Kate Weston and Mortimer Goss, actively cheating on their partners with each other. The gray-haired man sitting by himself in the car as if he's looking out for someone? Sherman Powers, probably waiting for his mistress to show up. The kid at the burger place down the street? Ari Fenrisson, he was… cheating on his homework by buying the answers off of someone else. Scum, all of them. I was going to make them-

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 4 -> 5]

My eyes opened wide as the sudden level up brought along a moment of clarity that pulled me out of my rage-fueled stupor. “What the hell?” I mumbled to myself before giving my head a thorough shake. I had to sit down at a nearby bench and take several breaths before I started to feel normal again. “Holy shit, that Skill is turning me into an asshole! Fucking last time I ever use it if I have to.”

I felt a pang of guilt. I wanted to grind [Detect Cheating] some more before my interview, but there was no way I could keep the passive on for much longer without doing something really stupid. Not to mention, if I walked into the interview with a homicidal attitude, there was no way I was getting hired!

That settled it, there wasn’t anything else to do.

I got up from my seat and continued down the sidewalk. I could at least explore the town a bit more and get a bite to eat in the meantime. Maybe I’d find something interesting?

It didn’t take as long as I expected for that to happen.

On the corner of the street was a strange building. It was painted white, extended two storeys tall, and was festooned with stained glass windows. It looked like a chapel, likely because it *was* a chapel. But unlike any chapel from back home, its mere presence commanded my attention and pulled me inside.

I didn’t consider myself to be particularly religious, but seeing the kind of hope that believers of a faith could wield against their inner demons left me feeling envious back home. Maybe that was what I needed now, then? Hope. Hope that I could ace the interview and use my job to carve out a safe and comfortable place for myself in this world.

I slowly entered the chapel, opening the polished, dark wooden doors and taking in the main chamber. The floor was laid with similarly dark hardwood, the walls were covered with a layer of cracked plaster leading up to stained glass windows featuring hues of red, orange, and purple. The most unexpected feature of the inside was that instead of a cross or crucifix at the end of the room above the podium, there was a statue of a large feather quill carved out of

pristine marble.

There was nothing like this back home, this wasn't a religion from Earth. I made my way down the aisle past the pews that lined most of the space. All but two of them were empty, where the three occupants in total were in deep thought or prayer. I found myself an empty space far away from the others and took a seat. There was a large, leather-bound tome nested inside a pocket on the back of the pew in front of me, which I picked up and began to leaf through.

Whatever I was reading, it definitely wasn't the bible. And even if it were, I doubted that "Thou shalt not commit adultery" would be part of *its* 10 commandments. I chuckled to myself as I tried to get a general sense of what I *was* reading. While the verses did have a similar prose and style to the new testament, the contents were completely different.

Most of the stories seemed to be about people looking for purpose or meaning, and facing big changes in their lives. My muscles relaxed as I continued to skim the book, feeling hopeful that it was exactly what I needed to rekindle my faith. As I finished skimming through the first third of the tome, I was interrupted by a man in gray, priestly robes.

"I don't believe I've seen you here before," said the older man, who looked to be in his sixties with a gray, balding head and a kindly look. "Welcome to the Church of Ultarian, my child."

The name rang a bell. Harold and his wife back at the apartments were worshippers, but I was otherwise completely in the dark about it. "I just moved here, actually. I'm not really familiar with this religion in particular, could you please tell me more about it?"

"Of course, my child! But *in particular* you say?" he asked with a look of surprise. "This is *the* religion of Ultarian, whom *all* worship. Were you perhaps raised in one of the cults?"

"Hold on, all? Like the whole world? This must be one popular religion if it's going to compete against Christianity."

"Of course! And it looks like you *were* raised away from His good

word. But you should worry no longer, for by His grace you have arrived here to learn the truth! There is no other true religion other than that of Ultarian in His wonderful world, and you would do to quickly forget the lies of the cults!"

I nodded robotically, forcing my mouth to remain tightly shut. I had dozens- no, hundreds of questions, but it would probably be easier to let the priest tell me everything himself.

"Very well, then. Long ago, Ultarian came to us and showed us His grand vision. You see, He is the ultimate storyteller, and his desire is for His children to experience the joys and sorrows of a story in order to grow."

"What kind of stories in particular?" I asked.

"All sorts of stories! Romance, thriller, *betrayal*. Anything that brings spice to life! For what is the purpose of existence if it weren't for some excitement?"

"But what about when you want a break from it?" I quickly shot back. "When you've had enough excitement for a lifetime?"

"Enough excitement?" The priest looked down on me gravely. "Never, excitement is what it means to live! It's the one purpose given to us, no other exists without it. What else would you do with your life if you weren't to pursue excitement?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I'd actually be living my life, then."

The priest remained silent as he processed my blasphemous words.

"I didn't ask for this, any of this." I slowly rose to my feet. "I finally got a second chance at life and I can't even live it! Everyone's just too goddamn horny to leave me alone, and even when I'd learned to ignore it, I got dragged into a war with the mob just to keep my fucking way of life!"

The older man stared at me for several seconds before opening his mouth. "A war with… my goodness, Ultarian has truly blessed you with an exciting life, my child! You should give Him thanks."

“He can kiss my ass! If putting me through all of this is what makes him happy, then he’s not getting any of my worship! He doesn’t deserve to be a god.”

The priest’s brows slowly furrowed. What happiness he felt had boiled away under the burning anger that I could see in his eyes. “Leave, now,” he spat. “I pray that you will find guidance. And only then will you be welcome back here.”

I turned around and began to leave, not bothering to give the old man a response.I made sure to get a block away from the chapel before I opened my mouth.

“God dammit,” I whispered to myself as the mid-day sun shined into my eyes.

It fit. It fit perfectly, and I hated how much it did. Ultarian’s ideals explained everything about this place, but which came first? The god or his ideals? Which one of the two really deserved my hatred? And was Ultarian even *real real*, or did nobody know for sure like back on Earth? And if he was real, was he the one who brought me to this world?

I let out a sigh, shrugged my shoulders, and continued down the sidewalk. “Eh, even the insane sex cults back home make more sense than this Ultarian shit.”

Chapter 30: Using a System isn't cheating if that's what the job is for

The noonday sun shone down on the few who dared test its wrath. The joggers and weekend workers sweated under the heat, but I stood my ground with confidence. Because this time, I remembered to wear deodorant to my interview.

Goldshanks' casino stood in the distance. I looked forth defiantly, having put aside what had happened earlier that day, ready to face what I was sure would be my greatest challenge yet. Before I could make it to the crosswalk, I was interrupted by a grimy hand on my arm.

"Got any spare change?"

"Huh? Oh sure," I said absentmindedly. I pulled out a fiver from my pocket and turned around to see Sam.

"Damn, generous as ever, Mike!" the vagrant exclaimed. "And you took my advice about Goldshanks!"

"Oh hey!" I said back. "Your tip about him paid off. He's the real deal and I've got an interview with him right now. I really owe you for that."

Sam took the bill from my hand and pocketed it with a smile. "There, your debt has been paid. But I won't need the charity for much longer, because that lady from the other night hired me!"

My face twisted into a look of horror. "At the sex dungeon?!"

"They have one of those?!" Sam broke out into a fit of laughter. "Haha! No, I said I was never going to step into a casino again after what happened to me at Victoria's Garden. That place was just… but anyway, Kozakov just has me managing his spies around town."

"Spies? You mean the BDSM addicts?"

"So that's what their deal was…" Sam trailed off. "But yeah, I just

give them instructions and report their progress. Don't know or care what they do, but I should be able to afford a place to stay soon!"

I wanted to say something, pop a hole in the balloon that was carrying him out of his hole by reminding him he was helping an evil man, but I stopped myself. Seeing the genuine look of hope on his face made me reconsider that. Maybe not my views on Kozakov, but on culpability; I couldn't blame him.

I placed a hand on the vagrant's shoulder. "I'm happy for you." I meant it.

"Yeah, thanks. I wouldn't have gotten the job if you didn't bring that lady my way," he shrugged.

"No problem," I nodded back. Despite my acceptance of Sam's new job, the concept of evil casino owners wouldn't leave my mind. "By the way, what happened at Victoria's Garden anyway? You make it sound like there was something about that place that was worse than the others. And that's saying something."

"Yeah, exactly." Sam began to look sullen.

"Oh shit, you don't have to say if it's bothering you."

"No, no, it's fine. Someone should hear this story." He took a drawn out breath. "I went in there one day planning to blow a hundred for some weekend fun, but then the owner got pissed off about me leaving so soon, and she told me to spend more money. There was something about her words, they were like ecstasy. I spent all of the money I had with me, maxed out my credit card then and there, and even withdrew everything from my bank account! But that wasn't enough. She had me take out a loan on the spot for everything I was worth, and I had to give up everything to pay it back."

I stared at the broken man before me. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. But couldn't you have fought against the loan or something? Declared bankruptcy, I don't know."

"Ha! Maybe if it was a normal loan, but it was issued by the mob! They're the reason why I'm on the streets!"

“And the owner just lets them operate in her casino?!”

“Of course, she’s one of them! It’s the only way!” Sam all but shouted. He took a second to regain his composure before continuing. “They’ve gotta be hand in glove, I’m telling you.”

Memories of my old landlady came to mind as I looked the man in the eyes and nodded. “I believe you.”

He nodded back. “Thanks. At least my ex-wife was able to sell the house and get away with our kid before the mob could collect. I just hope they’re safe, wherever she ran.”

I remained silent, I didn’t know how to respond.

“But at least the mob’s leaving me alone now!” Sam let out a dry chuckle. “I think Victoria just wanted to take everything from me. She’s had her fun and now I’m free.”

I didn’t think as I drew the vagrant into a tight hug. We stood there for several seconds before he patted me on the back and slowly eased his way out of my grip.

“Heh, that actually feels pretty nice, thanks. But I really shouldn’t be keeping you any longer. You’ve got an interview to ace, after all. Hope I didn’t bring you down too much.”

“Nah, you just reminded me *why* I’m here in the first place. Thank *you*.”

Sam let out one last laugh and turned around. I waited until he rounded the corner before I started towards Goldshanks’ casino.

I took a deep breath as I opened the door to the building. Something from me smelled a bit musty, a lot like the vagrant. My lips curled downwards. “So much for the deodorant.”

The inside of the casino was just as I remembered it from the day before. With no apparent windows, the place looked exactly the same, as if untouched by time. The only difference was the size of the crowd, which was slightly smaller on account of it being midday rather than at night. Still, the throngs of tourists padded the casino

floor enough that I had trouble making my way to the front desk.

The same woman as before stood there. She gave me a plastic smile that looked even more forced than yesterday and handed me a letter.

“This is for your interview,” she said. “The instructions are enclosed inside. Normally I’d say something like ‘break a leg’, so good luck.”

“Uh, thanks.” I nodded at her and opened up the envelope.

Inside was a note written on a typewriter and signed by pen. I read it.

“Dear Mr. Smith,

Welcome to your interview! There is currently a cheater present in the casino and it is your job to not just figure out who they are, but *how* they’re cheating, along with possible co-conspirators. Upon discovery of this information, please approach the front counter and tell Kamila that you have a meeting with me. She will let you into my office where you can fill me in on your discoveries. You have one hour to complete this task, starting from when you open this letter. All the best.

Your’s Truly,

Damian Goldshanks”

I put the letter in my pocket and looked out towards the crowd with a frown. I could barely make out individual people with how close they were together and how much they were moving around. How was *anyone* supposed to pass this test?

My brows creased as I began to think. With [Detect Cheating]’s passive form out of the picture, what was I supposed to do? The next best thing was its active form, but that only gave me peoples’ names. Nothing useful.

My eyes lit up. They gave me nothing useful *so far*. But what if I could coax another level up? Maybe I’d get a Skill perk that gave me better information? It was worth a shot.

Detect Cheating (lv 5)

Target Chad Polk

Nope. The man was just pawing at the pager in his pocket for a call, probably from his mistress.

Detect Cheating (lv 5)
Target Marcelah Honeysuckle

Nuh uh. He looked pretty anxious with how his eyes kept darting around the room, but he was likely on the lookout for someone he knew, not security.

Detect Cheating (lv 5)
Target Virginia Park

Hmm. Nothing. She seemed clean.

Three people, and no level up. I'd probably have to keep this up for who knows how long to get a level up, and they're supposed to be coming in fast! But something was odd about the scans just now.

I opened my eyes wide in realization. Taking another look at Chad, I could barely see anything bulging in his pockets, so how was I able to tell he had a pager? There was some kind of hidden perk attached to the Skill that wasn't listed in the description, and *that* would be how I was going to find the cheater!

I let [Detect Cheating] activate and fill my vision with text. My eyes sorted through the various names and followed wherever the Skill dragged them. To pockets, handbags, and hands. What little I saw filled my mind with everyone's intentions, and left me feeling confident whenever I crossed someone off the list.

Time lost meaning as I made thorough work of the people before me. I'd made it through about half of the crowd when a massive hand clasped my shoulder.

"Hey, Mike," came a deep voice from behind me. I looked up to see a hulking man in a tight suit wearing a nametag with the casino's logo. "Time's almost up. You've got ten minutes left."

"Wait, what?!" I shouted. "There's no way it's already been that

long!”

I looked at my watch and froze.

The bouncer looked at me with soft eyes. “Hey man, I heard you did really well at that initial interview, so I’m rooting for you. Good luck.” He patted me on the shoulder and walked off.

“Fuck me,” I whispered. My face twisted from a terrible snarl, to weepy frown, and finally to just blank. I always hated finishing late back in school, but I had a trick that always made things a little bit better. If I was going to get fucked, I’d might as well say “fuck it” and try any and all hail marys I could think of. I couldn’t even begin to count how many grades that strategy had saved.

“[Detect Cheating] isn’t my only Skill, so let’s see what else I can do. Open System”

I closed my eyes and began to focus on each of my listed Skills one-by-one.

Second on the list was [Revenge]. I tried to turn it on, but it gave me a feeling as if my activation was incomplete. It needed something else. A target. But who the hell was I supposed to pick? I didn’t really hate anyone here, though that attendant wasn’t too fond of me.

I looked towards her as I tried activating the Skill. The result was my muscles tensing and a light frustration beginning to bubble in my stomach. The crowd appeared the exact same to all of my senses, so that was a bust.

Before I deactivated the Skill, I tried using the [Minor Inconvenience]. I focused intently on the attendant and let the Perk fly. I was hoping for the cheater to do something to reveal themselves, but all I got was the attendant grabbing their stomach while bending over.

A second later, she ripped a massive fart that caught the attention of half the casino. With cheeks as red as a tomato, the woman ran over to the bathroom and out of the public eye. Honestly, I didn’t even laugh. That wasn’t funny, it just felt mean. As I deactivated the Skill,

I felt much of my tension vanish, but not the blow to my conscience.

There was no point feeling guilty when I had only a few minutes remaining, I could always make it up to her once I got hired. I looked back at the list and saw that I was at the end. My third and final Skill was [Tinker]. What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

Well, I was out of options, might as well give it a shot. I called forth the Skill and tried focusing it on the crowd before me. There weren't many advanced technological gadgets, it being 1980 and there being no computers around, but it was still hard to get a feel for what was there.

One more try. I activated the Perk, [Diagnose Problem], and let my eyes haphazardly run through everyone.

Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem **Device** Pager **Issue** Bad signal
Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem **Device** Credit Card **Issue** Magnetic strip worn out
Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem **Device** Hidden Earphones **Issue** Improperly tuned to channel

What the hell was that?

I looked over to where I got the last message, and saw a man sitting at the poker table. He was staring intently at his hand, and not even bothering to look at the others whenever something happened.

So there he was, my cheater. With seven minutes left, I could've just turned him in and been done with this interview, but that wouldn't cut it. I took out the letter and reread it. Goldshanks specifically asked for several pieces of information, so that was what he was grading me by. I couldn't just turn my test in with only a third of the answers filled! I might as well have tried to do what I could in the time I had left.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 5 -> 6]

Chapter 31: Detective Chuck

I fucking loved the System! And I also fucking hated it. Today was a love day, however.

My [Tinker] Skill sussed out the cheater thanks to his hidden speaker being out of tune, but I wasn't done just yet. I had to figure out where his illicit information was coming from to really impress Goldshanks.

I got out of the cushioned stool by the slot machine and slowly walked over to the cheater's table. He was sitting stock still, eyes staring at the cards in his hand. He didn't so much as look up when the dealer placed down the stage cards, or flinch when his opponent screamed in frustration as he chose to fold, the only movements I saw were on his lips. In hindsight, that should've given it away.

"[Detect Cheating], why don't you take it from here?" I whispered.

Detect Cheating (lv 5)
Target Charles Gross

My eyes were immediately pulled to his left ear as expected, but they were soon dragged towards the emergency alleyway exit. Not wanting to lose the feeling, I followed along and walked outside after making sure the door wasn't linked to some kind of alarm.

The pull on my gaze didn't stop until I looked up at a metal box attached to the outer wall. It was an incredibly unassuming electrical container, just a stainless steel cube with a keyhole on the side and metal tubes coming out of it that led back into the building. In other words, the perfect place to hide a radio transmitter.

It was too far away to get a proper look at. I took several steps back, and after making sure that nobody was around, I began running towards the box and leaped as I reached the wall it was fastened to. I flew several feet into the air and grabbed hold of one of the pipes, thankful that there was a gap between the tube and the wall for my fingers to fit.

I stood there for several seconds to make sure I wasn't about to fall back down. When I was confident I had a grip, I looked more closely at the electric box. The lock was barely scratched, so the lock wasn't likely broken. Especially since it was also attached to the box itself, so it couldn't have been replaced to hide the damage.

"So what's wrong, then?" I mumbled to myself.

"You tell me!" came a shout from below. "And maybe you can tell the police as well!"

The sudden noise made me lose my balance and I tumbled down to the ground. Despite the concrete floor, my fall still kicked up a cloud of dust that left me coughing as I got back up.

"So, you fancy yourself some kind of inspector? You can't fool me, cheater!" exclaimed an older man in front of me. He had gray hair and wrinkled skin, but unlike the old folks I'd seen so far, he had the face of someone who hated fun. It didn't help that he was wearing an off-blue uniform with the words "security" written over it. "And you couldn't even be smart enough to bring a ladder? Boy, my job is getting *easy*! Now come on, let's get you to the police."

"Wait, hold on! I'm not a cheater! I'm here to catch one!" I shouted. "I'm in the middle of an interview with Goldshanks and the cheater I'm supposed to catch did something to that box."

"Really, an interview?" The old man poked his head out at me. I instinctively took a step back. "Now how come I heard nothing about this? I'm sure you have some kind of proof?"

"I… oh yeah!" I reached into my pocket and pulled out Goldshanks' letter, handing it over to the old man.

He looked over the sheet of paper with a careful eye, before crumpling it up and sticking it in his pocket. "I bet this was forged."

"What?!" I shouted. "No it isn't!"

"Yeah, I'm sure it is. The signature's not right."

"I got it from one of the attendants! It even has the casino's logo on

the paper!"

"I still don't believe you. Now come on, I'm calling the police."

"Wait!" I interrupted him as he was reaching for a walkie talkie. "Why don't you just ask whoever's on the other side if I'm supposed to be interviewing? That'll be proof."

"No can do. This walkie talkie is for security purposes only."

"And isn't my identity related to security?"

"Mmh, I don't see how. I'll use it to get someone to call the police, though."

My brain short-circuited. I looked down at my hands to make sure I wasn't dreaming, and when I turned my wrist, I saw the time on my watch. One minute left.

"*Fuck,*" I silently whimpered before taking a deep breath and talking in a slow voice, like I would to a baby. "How about if we check with the front desk, sir? I'm sure the attendant there can tell you I'm an interviewee."

"Well… alright. But I'll be performing a citizen's arrest when Kamila tells me otherwise." The old man grabbed my arm and dragged me to the back door. His pull didn't have much force behind it, but his grip was like iron and absolutely stung!

Seriously, how was anyone supposed to tamper with the electrical box with a security guard *this* anal hanging around?

Before I made it through the door, I looked back at the electrical box and activated my Skill.

Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem
Device Electrical Box **Issue** N/A

Wait, nothing?

"Hey Kamila!" screamed the security guard when he was within ten

feet of the front counter.

The attendant covered her ears as the man approached her. She looked as displeased as I was. “What is it, Frank?”

“Caught this here cheater outside telling me he was an interviewee! Ha! Of all things-”

“He is,” she deadpanned back.

“Great! So call the police, then.”

“No,” she sighed. “He *is* regrettably here for an interview.”

“Aww shucks.” The old man snapped his finger. “Well why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“Yeah, why didn’t you tell him?” I asked, trying to shake the old man’s grip. But he still wouldn’t let me go.

“Oh, it must’ve slipped my mind,” replied Kamila with a fox-like grin. “But it looks like his interview is just about up! I’m assuming you were about to leave without saying anything, since you went out the back door.“

“Nope, just went out to check for clues,” I replied, only focused on getting out of Frank’s grip.

“Well you’re free to go now, in any case. I doubt you figured it out if you thought there’d be clues outside. It wasn’t even that complicated!”

That was the last clue I needed, the pieces all snapped together. My lips curled up into a smile that rivaled the smugness in even Kamila’s and I softly spoke. “I’ve actually figured it out. I’d like that appointment with Mr. Goldshanks, please.”

The attendant’s face fell into a neutral look. “Very well then,” she said between bared teeth. “Follow me.”

I ripped my arm out of the security guard’s hand and began following Kamila, but not before giving Frank a glare. He returned it.

“Goldshanks’ office is on the left, same place as last time,” said the attendant.

“What about the security room?” I asked. “I’d like to talk to the guy who’s in charge of that if I’m going to be working with them.”

“Todd? He’s in the room at the far left, but I don’t see any need for you to go in there until Goldshanks-.”

I didn’t let the attendant finish, and shot past her towards the back of the hallway.

“Hey!” She shouted at me. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

I ignored her and threw open the door on the left. She began calling for additional security, but I didn’t mind. I’d found exactly what I was looking for.

Inside, a short man with curly brown hair carefully spoke into a microphone while his eyes were glued to the monitors hanging from the wall. The screens showed the casino floor from the eyes of the security cameras at all angles. The slot machines, the roulette wheels, and most importantly, the poker tables. The largest screen was zoomed in on the hands of the cheater’s opponents.

“Alright, I found your cheater!” I exclaimed, turning around to face my forming audience.

They promptly tackled me to the ground.

“Hey, hey!” I shouted as they picked me up by each of my limbs. I tried to wrench myself free from their grips without hurting them, but it was hard to break free without giving someone a black eye. I was starting to have second thoughts about how I was going about this…

“What’s going on?!” boomed a familiar voice.

I lifted my head to see a tall, rotund man saunter into the room. A cigar lazily hung from his mouth, but his eyes were as sharp as a hawk’s. And they were staring right into my soul.

“M-Mr. Goldshanks, sir!” I let out between struggles. I hoped I’d be able to keep myself in the same room for long enough to speak my peace. “I found the cheater!”

Damien Goldshanks silently held out a hand and the bouncers stopped. They looked at each other before slowly letting me down.

I got up and dusted myself off. The casino’s owner looked at me drily, his glare being a prompt to continue.

“Uh, right. So I found the cheater, Charles Gross.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And you barged into the security room to tell me that?”

“I barged in here to confirm my suspicions on *how* he was cheating! I figured out everything you asked me to find!”

Several people in the room raised their eyebrows, but didn’t speak a word.

“He had a small speaker in his ear that was feeding him information on all of his opponents’ hands.” I paused for a second before realizing that I couldn’t just leave it at that. Sure, I had the System tell me how he was cheating, but I couldn’t say that to everyone here without getting thrown into an insane asylum. “That’s why he didn’t even bother looking at their facial expressions while playing. He was staring at his cards the entire time.” Nice save, Chuck. Nice save.

“So that’s the first thing I asked of you,” said Goldshanks with a patient nod. “Find the cheater and how he’s doing it. What else did you discover?”

“I tracked the signal to the electrical box out in the back. That’s where I was found by Frank, who didn’t take kindly to me trying to inspect it.”

“He’s one of our most careful and determined security guards,” said Goldshanks.

“Yeah, and anal,” whispered someone in the room, who surprisingly wasn’t me.

The owner ignored the comment and continued. “He wouldn’t take kindly to *anyone* tampering with our electronics.”

“Exactly!” I said, slamming a fist into my open palm. “So how would *anyone* be able to tamper with it to cheat? And how would the accomplice be able to look at everyone’s cards on top of that? It made no sense! But that’s when Kamila’s comment helped me piece it all together.”

“What did I say?” said the attendant in a huff.

“That the answer is simple. And it really is! So how was everything hacked? It wasn’t. It was an inside job, and Todd here is the one getting the information and feeding it to our cheater. So there’s your cheater, the method, and finally, their accomplice.”

The room stayed silent as I spread out my hands in a display of showmanship.

Someone coughed.

Shit, did I overdo it?

Clap, clap, clap.

Everyone turned to face the source of the sound: Damien Goldshanks.

“Ha. Haha! This is exactly what happened at the World Poker Tournament three years ago!” The owner walked forward until he was just in front of me. “A venue employee with access to security cameras was caught feeding information to the man who ended up winning the whole thing. It was an utter embarrassment to the host, and I need someone who’ll keep something like that from happening to *me*.”

“Wait, does that mean-”

“You’ve got the job!” Goldshanks let out a guffaw as he slapped my shoulder with a massive hand. “Goldshanks’ Casino is going to be hosting the latest iteration of the tournament starting Monday, and I’ll need all the extra security I can get!”

“Really?! Yes!” I pumped my fist in the air.

“Yup, you’re now on floor security. The pay is three hundred a day for the course of the tournament, with one hundred a day afterwards.”

“As in dollars?”

“What else? In Otrokan tolars?” Goldshanks let out another laugh.

I laughed nervously with him until the number he gave me finally hit. Then I was laughing for real.

“But it’s not all fun and games. I expect you to be working your ass off during the tournament with how many cheaters there’ll probably be. Now, let’s head to my office and get the contract signed. I expect you to be here on Monday at 9 am on the dot.”

“Yes sir!” I exclaimed, following Damien Goldshanks to his office.

After signing the contract, I headed out to find something nice to eat. It had been a long morning, and I deserved a break.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 6 -> 7]

[Detect Cheating Perk Obtained! Information: Method]

Where the hell was *that* when I needed it?!

Chapter 32: Who needs sex when you've got Garlic Bread?

I left Goldshanks' casino with my head held high, whistling a tune. I got a new job, went up another level, and I was gearing up to start grinding my way to the stratosphere! I felt like I was invincible, the king of the world! Nothing could stop me! Except…

I felt my stomach rumble.

It was just past noon, and while I didn't normally eat lunch until an hour or two later, I figured I could treat myself to an early meal.

Most of the stores around me came off as trashy tourist traps. Dive bars, tiny boutiques, and other overpriced garbage. Like hell I was going into any of them.

I decided to head back home, and see if I could find a nice restaurant around there instead. The walk didn't take too long. The Atlantic City suburbs were much nicer than the downtown by miles, and that included the restaurants. One in particular caught my eye, a Japanese place.

I entered the restaurant and was seated almost immediately. I received a menu and ordered the first thing I recognized; a California roll. I was honestly surprised they had something so familiar, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Eventually, the meal arrived at my table and I began to dig in.

I let out a contented sigh. The food was delicious, exactly how I remembered it from back home; perfectly filling and easy on the stomach, but not bloating. I still felt plenty of energy despite eating two plates of rolls, and not a drop of sleepiness!

I looked down at my stomach and grumbled. I'd just beaten an impossible interview and got myself the kind of job most people could only dream of! I was at war with the fucking mob! I deserved some dessert.

After paying my bill, I headed out and looked around for something

that would satisfy me. Most of the shops didn't have much, but an Italian place caught my eye. I felt like I could really go for some tiramisu.

"Hello, and welcome to Vicchi's Trattoria!" exclaimed the hostess as I walked inside. "Let me take you to your seat."

I followed her to an empty table with two chairs, took my seat, and made my order. "Just a tiramisu please, and hold the wine. I've got a long day ahead of me."

"Of course!" she nodded back before placing a small plate in front of me. "And here's your complimentary plate of garlic bread."

I looked at the slices. One of those fancy Italian loaves was cut in half lengthwise and then sliced into pieces by its width. Each piece was then coated in a thick layer of butter and garlic puree and baked until the surface was golden brown. I scraped the top with a fork and smiled at the sound. I lifted up one of the slices to my mouth, but before I could take a bite, I heard some people take a seat at the table behind me that I didn't see coming in from the front.

"Damn these shakes, man," said a man from that group. His voice was gruff and had a thick New Jersey accent, but still elicited some sympathy from me. He sounded like he had it bad.

"Well, this here garlic bread is supposed to help with that," said another voice. This one belonged to a woman, similarly accented but sounding nasally.

"I hope so," added a third with a long exhale. He sounded somewhat dopey. "I've barely been able to get any action since our last hook-up spot unionized."

"We all haven't, bozo!" shouted the first. "And if it weren't for that stupid no coworker hookup policy, I'd be banging Nancy's brains out in the alleyway right now!"

"Oh please, as if I'd settle for you," the woman laughed. But her voice quickly turned dour. "Ok, maybe I would."

My eyes bugged out. I slowly turned my head to see the trio behind

me dressed in gray pinstripe suits with matching white fedoras and purple ties. They were in the middle of shoving the small plate of garlic bread down their throats like it was life saving medicine.

“Sherioushly,” said the first mobster in between bites. “When I get my handsh on the shun of a bitcsh who got them tellersh to unionishe, I’m gonna make him wish he wash dead!”

I jerked my head back to my own plate and took a small nibble of my own bread. It was surprisingly good, but that didn’t distract me from what was happening just over my shoulder. They knew someone was behind it, and the tellers *and* union rep had my name.

“Yeah, Marty McSchmiddt is done for!”

I felt my shoulders sag and I let out a long, drawn out sigh. It was like a great weight was lifted off me. I even let out a sniffle at the sheer balls on the bank tellers for not using my real name.

“Hey buddy, you alright?” asked Nancy. “Yeah, you at the table by yourself.”

I froze. “Uh… yeah! I’m doing fine! This garlic bread is just *that* good! It’s making me tear up! Heh.”

They shrugged and turned back to their own not-so-private conversation.

“Seriously, this delivery is taking way too long,” grumbled the first man. “We should’ve been outta here already, but *someone* demanded we stay and eat some garlic bread!”

“Sorry, sir.” The other man began to twiddle his thumbs. “It was the boss who said we should try it, so I thought we should do what she says.”

“Our boss is also the reason I can’t get it on with Nancy here! Hell if *I* ever cross queen bee, but a *suggestion* is just a suggestion. It’s the only time we can quietly tell her to eat shit and get away with it. It’s the only time it’s safe.” He felt a small shiver.

They all did.

The three quickly scarfed down their garlic bread and got up. The lead man was holding a metal briefcase in a vise-like grip, and something about it caught my eye. I knew what I had to do.

“[Revenge: Minor Inconvenience]”

The apparent leader somehow tripped on the completely smooth floor and the suitcase went flying into the ground, top-first. As if by magic, the latches snapped open and several wads of hundred dollar bills came tumbling out.

They all stayed bound together, however, and the mobster was able to quickly gather and put them back inside. He slammed the briefcase shut and hugged it tightly.

I’d made the mistake of watching the whole thing, and all three of them glared daggers at me.

“You fuckin’ saw nuthin’!” shouted the lead mobster.

“I-I saw nothing!” I squeaked back. I’d seen everything.

The trio quickly left the restaurant and got into a nearby parked car before driving off.

Back inside, I was deep in thought. It all made sense. That briefcase had way too much cash for it to be protection money from this place alone. The restaurant had to be the mob’s money laundering front!

This must’ve been where all of the cash from shakedowns went, and they likely cooked the books to make it look like they sold more food than they did, with the supposed profits actually being the stolen cash. That way, the government would be none the wiser. But what would happen if somebody gave the Internal Revenue Service a little tip?

I faced forwards again as the trio left, thankful that they decided to leave me alone. Thankful for thinking that I wasn’t a threat.

“Open System,” I said as I took another bite of garlic bread.

Chapter 33: Sneaking and Entering

The restaurant was practically empty. The hostess was currently in the kitchen, and there was nobody to man the register. Practically dead but somehow swimming in cash; that was what money laundering fronts looked like.

I closed the System menu and rose out of my seat. There was only one other door besides the kitchen and front entrance, and it was hidden in a far-off corner and read “staff only.” I slowly approached it.

“You idiot!” came a shout from just beyond the door.

I began to walk on the balls of my feet until I was just at the entrance, and cracked it open to hear better.

“But boss, you said ten grand’s the limit!” another man whined. “That’s as far as I went!”

“Well what kind of nut job spends ten grand at once at a place like this?!”

“But what does that matter if it’s still below the…”

“Forget the limit, will ya?! That’s just there to catch idiots who think a dollar below it somehow looks clean. Those goons at the Department of Justice actually have brains, unlike you!”

“I-I’m real sorry, boss.”

“Good, so start fixing up those books. I’ve got a hot date to get to, and I expect you to be done by the time I get back in an hour.”

“Sure thing, boss!”

I let go of the door and dashed back to my seat, careful not to make any noise. Thankfully there was no need. Whoever was in the back didn’t come through the door I was listening through, probably exiting through the back of the restaurant.

So that confirmed it, this really was a money laundering front for the mob.

I didn't immediately get back up. As much as I would've loved to strut into the back and cause chaos, I needed at least some semblance of a plan, especially with someone keeping guard.

Trying to beat him up would likely make enough noise for someone to check in, and the mob would likely have some armed thugs close by for additional security…

I slammed my head into my table and heard the plates and cutlery rattle. "What the fuck am I doing?" I said in a muffled whisper.

I slowly turned my head around the restaurant and took in the lonely space. The white tiles and fluorescent lights made me feel like I was somewhere sterile, like a doctor's office, but the red tablecloths scattered on the tables did well to break that monotony. That little touch of humanity elevated it to feeling like a therapist's office, a place with an artificially imposed comfort meant to get people to open up about themselves. And it was making me open up *to* myself.

About how I was ready to pick a fight when there were likely armed gunmen in the same building. This wasn't anything like getting the bank to unionize; they asked me to help them out first, and there wasn't a single weapon involved! Even if it did paint a target on my back, it was nowhere near as direct as… this.

What was I doing this for? Why was I putting my life on the line?

Crunch

I bit into the garlic bread and gave it a slow chew. The strong flavor filled my mouth in small bursts every time my teeth clicked together. It was nice. It was… a comfort. The kind of simple comfort my life often lacked back home, one that I finally got to taste here as a humble handyman when I could just do my job in peace.

But the mob was a threat to that peace. For once, I'd turned my life into a garden I was finally happy with, and I'd do anything to keep it that way. As Voltaire said, "you have to cultivate your garden", and I

had a few weeds to pull.

So, how do I pull out these weeds? I'd have to take the diplomatic approach, and there was no question about it. I let out something between a grumble and a sigh.

It'd been a long day and I would've rather mindlessly used my fists to get results. A grin spread across my face when I remembered Charisma, and how I could let it do all of the thinking, but my smile quickly dropped into a frown when I remembered what that accursed attribute had gotten me into the last two times I'd used it. I could've sworn it had a mind of its own.

I wracked my brain trying to come up with some semblance of a plan that didn't rely on Charisma. But out of all of my abilities, it was the only one that was truly impressive. At 19, I was one point away from being one of the most convincing people in the world! I could've used it to start a cult if I wanted to! My next closest attribute was Intelligence, sitting at 16, but all that could do was tell me how much I absolutely needed Charisma.

I let out a loud groan while grabbing at my hair. Why couldn't the tournament have started sooner, I really needed those level ups! Sure, I could've just come back to try again later, but something about the moment felt *right*. The place was empty, and it was my first time here; they'd suspect a repeat customer as casing the joint. Not to mention that the head book cooker was gone, leaving me with too good of an opportunity!

Besides, Hiroi said that he was unable to keep up with the mob's latest payments, and I didn't know if I'd be able to get strong enough to hit them hard without any worries before… I didn't want to think about it.

Eventually, I took a deep breath and accepted things for how they were. For all it could do, Charisma was always going to be a horny negging asshole.

My head shot up. That was it!

I got back up and approached the back door while cracking my neck

and channeling the terrible ability. I had practically made it a personal policy to show up any asshole who got in my way, but just this once, I was going to have to work with one.

Once through, I found myself in a plain tiled hallway with nothing to decorate the bland walls, not even security cameras.

“Hey, who are you? You’re not supposed to be here,” said the lone man standing in the corridor with a low growl. He looked like a stereotypical 80s geek, with thick glasses and white button that had a breast pocket filled with pens. Despite his pipsqueak demeanor, there was a fire in his voice, the kind that would be unashamed at shouting for help at the first sign of trouble.

“So I guess your manager ran off on you, huh?” I asked, letting Charisma slick my voice with a certain level of cocky suave. “And he even left you with all the work.”

“I asked a question, who are you?” he repeated.

“Who do you think I am, buddy?” I shot back. “Do I have to flash you some kind of ID?”

He took a step back at my demeanor.

That was what Charisma was, a cocky asshole, and my plan to properly use it was to just let it do its thing. Sex and power, that was all it cared about, so I was going to have it offer the first and project the second.

The scrawny man took a deep breath to power through the intimidation and eked out a question. “S-so you’re with the org, then?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Trick question, we don’t call it ‘the org’. So who the hell are you?”

I froze. Was this really the best 19 Charisma could do for me, get me caught after a few seconds? Were it and the System really that pathetic?

Something in my brain stirred, some part of it that was connected to the System. A faint pulse of emotion flared up that wasn't quite my own. It was a feeling of pride, and it held a meaning; challenge accepted.

A second later, my lips started working on their own. "Well, *I* call it the clan, so I don't give a shit what *you* call it."

The man adjusted his glasses and let out a grumble, but didn't make any more complaints. I did my best not to let out a sigh of relief.

"My manager's out on a date. He'll be back in an hour to help me out."

"Yeah sure, only an hour. I remember *all* my dates taking exactly that long." My lips curled up into a sarcastic grin.

He hunched his shoulders and looked around before whispering. "There's no way that man could ever get a woman to like him for more than an hour, so I think he's actually just getting laid. It definitely won't be that long."

"Right." I nodded with a mocking smile. "And he leaves little old you to clean up the mess while he gets to have all the fun with a prostitute."

"I mean, I know he'll… hold on, how the hell do you know that?!"

I looked right into the man's eyes with a sneer, he wasn't going to pull another fast one over me. But what *was* he trying to pull?

"…no, really. How did you know he was doing it with one of them?"

My mouth creaked open and it took a lot of my willpower not to drop the tough-guy act. "Uh, who else will he have sex with after the bank unionized?"

"Well nobody's got a reason to think it's with a prostitute when *they're* practically unionized as well, so how'd *you* figure it out?"

"You think I'd actually tell you?" I scoffed. "Just know I'm well connected, and far above you."

“D-do you know one of them, then? Yeah, that makes sense. It’s not even a real union, just a ladies’ agreement, so I’m not surprised there are leakers. But why would *any* of them turn around like that?”

“You say it like they hate us.”

“They do, after we tried taking a cut from them for working the streets. Now they won’t service *any* of us!”

“Wow, you sure do blab a lot,” I said with an icy look. “No wonder your boss needs to keep looking over your work.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean,” the man said with a stutter. “I-I-I”

While the man was at his lowest, I focused my Charisma back into my voice, ready to deliver the finishing blow. “Well, the good news is that the big boss has got more than just one prostitute like that reserved for the best people here. Somehow, and against my advice, he made sure you had a place amongst them. He says to get your ass over to Victoria’s Garden as soon as you can.” I knew that the casino had some kind of connection to the mob, and that it was at least a twenty minute drive away. That would give me plenty of time to mess things up.

“Wait up, *he*?” The man pushed up his glasses and stood straight, powering through the psychological vice I had him in. “The *big boss* is a woman! What are you up to?!” He began to raise his voice.

I bit my lip and began to think. With the rate he was getting back his confidence, I didn’t have much time before he figured me out. As he took in a deep breath to shout, I lifted up my hands to calm him. “Easy, easy! I was talking about *my* boss who got you a woman. The *big boss* gave him a quota and decided to save a spot for you!”

“Why would *your* boss save a spot for me?”

“Eh, politics.” I shrugged. “We need some money laundered at a good rate, and *your* boss is kind of a prick.”

“You can say that again.” The man leaned back on the wall and rolled his eyes. “So what is it you want from me in return, exactly?”

“Better laundry rates, for starters. And maybe some free dessert? The tiramisu’s a fucking ripoff.”

“Yeah, I could do that. And you said at Victoria’s Garden, right?”

“That’s right, go have some fun, kid!”

The accountant didn’t even say goodbye before rushing past me and out the back door. A couple of seconds later, and his car zoomed past outside and out onto the road.

The smarmy look on my face slowly dropped into a tired frown as I turned off Charisma. That worked better than expected, but rather than letting out a genuine smile, I only felt a small shiver. I was in control of myself the entire time, but I was almost certain now that the System might’ve had a mind of its own.

Chapter 34: How NOT to Commit Tax Fraud

The inside of the restaurant's main office looked nothing like I would've expected it. Rows of filing cabinets covered most of the walls, with a floor-bolted metal safe nestled in between two of them, while expensive looking paintings covered the rest of the walls. The carpet was a dark forest green that complemented the mahogany desk in the center. Several sheets of paper and manilla envelopes were scattered across it, along with a landline telephone, a small collection of ballpoint pens next to a fountain tip, and a bottle of white correctional fluid.

The room was also completely empty, without even a single security camera present! The two bookkeepers who ran this place believed they won the carnal lottery and subsequently ran out, leaving the door to this place unlocked and everything inside to me.

I stepped over to the desk and took a seat in the comfy leather chair, but not before properly locking the front door. I'd need some privacy for what I was about to do.

So the name of the game here was money laundering, and my mission was simple. I overheard what their greatest fear was, and I was going to make it a reality; a visit from the federal government.

I flipped open the manilla folder right in front of me that was labeled with the current month and began to flip through the pages. It was all there, sales charts, bulk orders, salaries, the works. And looking through it all, nothing really stood out as suspicious.

But that was because I wasn't an accountant. I didn't know all of the little things the mob had to do to keep eyes off of them, but I didn't really have to, because all it would take was a single big thing to get eyes on them. A devilish smile crept across my lips. It was time to make some trouble.

To start things off, I opened up the sales chart, and after taking time to understand what all of the columns represented, I changed one of the transactions to be above ten grand. It was simple, I just had to add a few extra zeros in the SALE column of that table. I was a

genius!

I snickered to myself at… how easy that would be to fix. The accountant's apprentice was already looking for them, after all.

My body sagged into the chair as I let out a sigh. Maybe this wouldn't be as easy as I expected? But before I could toss all of the records into the paper shredder out of spite, I felt a small tingle at the back of my head, a humble request from something that wanted to be let out. It wasn't Charisma, or some Skill. It was a different attribute. I closed my eyes and focused on it, deciding that it wasn't likely to be too much of a risk, at least with nobody here. My eyes opened wide as I harnessed Intelligence.

Harnessing a new attribute felt unfamiliar. I didn't have a need for anything but Charisma all this time, with my own natural talents being more than enough for everything I'd faced. But I was still glad I had it. Especially right now.

The feeling the attribute gave me, it wasn't as if something was modifying my brain. It was more like something was passively suggesting ideas in the back of my mind. Really good ideas. The first of which was to add a few more transactions to the ledger. A few ten k's here, a couple of eights there, and a very regular series of several five hundred dollar sales each month.

The attribute didn't bother to actually tell me what its reasoning was, no matter how hard I poked and prodded it. The best explanation I could come up with was that a lot of the same number repeated so evenly would look suspicious to the trained eye, but not the assistant. Satisfied with what I came up with, I continued on with the next idea.

There was a sub-folder inside of the main one that contained a list of both written and printed receipts. Some were small but others for massive quantities of overpriced food, likely filed away to "prove" that those sales were legitimate and not just mindless cash dumps.

I flipped a switch underneath the desk and a mechanical whirring came to life. Metal blades began to spin inside their clear cage, with only an opening in a thin plastic cover acting as the half-assed shield

between someone's hands and the paper shredder. The receipts all went falling in.

Brrrr

The heavy blades quickly turned the long strips of paper into mulch with its distinctive whir. Music to my ears.

Before Intelligence could suggest something else, I temporarily turned it off. It was helpful, but I was actually starting to have some fun, and I wanted to be the one to think up the next idea!

I'd spent about five minutes trawling through the folder and its several remaining sub-folders before I found something that looked promising. Employment forms.

The restaurant apparently had several dozen men and women working under them, all earning amazing salaries that even rivaled what Hiroi was willing to pay for an apartment complex gigolo or Goldshanks for my expertise. It wouldn't take a genius to see what was so suspicious about all of that. There was only a single hostess at the front during what should've been the lunch rush, and likely just as few workers in the kitchen. Besides, this place didn't even have enough room to host so many employees! Their high pay must've been how the restaurant "spent" all of its laundered money. The few people here would get a normal salary while the rest of it left in those suitcases being carried off by the mobsters.

That wouldn't do, would it? I took several of the personnel sheets and threw them into the shredder as well. But only a few of them. As for the others, I took a little bit of white-out to their salaries and tripled their previous pay. A smaller number would've kept the numbers from adding up and gotten government attention faster, but I didn't have it in me to fuck them over, even fictionally, after what I'd been through at Mike's old retail job. Anyone in the service industry deserves to be respected for what they have to go through.

I was satisfied with having played my own part in this act of revenge. I turned Intelligence back on and shamelessly had it hold my hand the rest of the way. It, however, had other plans.

My eyes were slowly guided to the rotary telephone sitting on the desk. The attribute wanted me to make a call. But to whom? And what the hell was I supposed to say?

…

I had nothing. For an attribute that was only at 13, it had given me more than I had expected, and I was honestly grateful. But there was still a little bit more to do, and I knew I had it in me to finish this.

I began to open up the desk's drawers and pilfer through their contents. Most of them were stationery, but I eventually found a small leather-bound booklet. It was filled with a list of names, titles, and seven to ten-digit numbers. It was a phonebook; jackpot.

There were several numbers inside, and I began to dial them one by one.

"Wholesale Food Solutions, how can I help you?"

"Yeah," I said, putting on my best impression of the head accountant. "We're going to need to triple the usual order for Vicci's Trattoria."

"Ah, the order you made earlier today wasn't enough? Well either way, can do, sir!"

I hung up and dialed the next number.

"Ayy, how's my favorite money guy doin'!" asked a man on the other end with a thick accent. "You washed the collections I brought you yet?"

"Ahead of schedule!" I exclaimed back. This must've been one of the higher-ranked mobsters in charge of running one of the rackets. "Enough that I can take double- no triple, so have it wired over."

"I ain't about to look a shark like youse in the mouth, so it's comin' right up!"

The man hung up, and I continued onto the third number.

"Hello, Bruno," a curt woman replied. "Is there something you

wished to change with your campaign donations?"

My eyebrows rose as I looked back at the paper. "Marissa Rosemont" was all it read, along with the letters "PAC" written next to it in parentheses. Something about that sounded familiar, and from what I remembered about the one political science class I never really paid attention to in high school, it had to do with election campaigns. It was time to take a risk.

"Uh, yeah," I answered lackadaisically in an attempt to hide how quickly my heart was beating. "Remind me again who I'm donating to?"

There was a sigh on the other end. "Your Political Action Committee has a relatively modest amount of money put towards several local candidates, most of them incumbents. The police commissioner for one, as well as several prosecutors, and a few trial judges. Our mayoral candidate is the challenger this time around, rather than the incumbent, since our last man got kicked out for corruption within a year into his position. You sure do know how to pick them."

"R-right, I knew all that." I covered the receiver with my hand as I let out a muffled laugh. It looked like I hit the jackpot! "So how humble exactly *are* these donations?"

"As humble as you requested, sir," the woman replied. She was beginning to sound irritable. "Just enough 'to not get any attention' but enough to 'get them wet'." There was a one second pause, which I could've sworn the woman used to roll her eyes. "It's not quite a politically appropriate term, but it gets the point across. They'll be wet."

"Well, change of plans," I said with a fake New Jersey accent that matched the lead money launderer's over the staticky phone. "I want them fucking soaking! Up the money to as high as you can make it, and even more if it won't land you in jail. It's time to show these bozos who *really* runs this town!"

"But that would get attention from federal authorities!" The woman shot back. For the first time, there was concern in her voice.

I silently took a deep breath and let Charisma flow through me. I just wished there was a way to apologize for whatever it would say next. “Is that complaining’ I hear? I thought you were supposed to be head of the PAC, not PMS! Cool your tits before they start running red too!”

“Fine! You want money, I’ll give you money! But if the feds knock on my door, I’m pointing them to you. I hope you enjoy the grave under the bus I’ll throw you under!” She hung up.

I flashed a bittersweet smile. It was in my favor that the lady on the other end had self respect. As wrong as it felt, that made it easier to user her as a tool to fuck the mob over.

I continued down the phone book, dialing the rest of the numbers and having them either send or spend as much money as I could get them to. It didn’t take too long to reach the end of the first page, and on the second, there was nothing. The rest of the booklet was completely empty.

The dozen or so people I’d called definitely would’ve been enough to cause plenty of trouble, I still wasn’t satisfied. I turned the chair around to face the lone safe, and rose to my feet. My shadow loomed over the metal box as I approached it.

My hand went over the dial and slowly began to turn it when I heard a squeak. I turned it again, and the same loud sound rang out. It had only been about a week, but my handyman job drove an instinct into me. “*[Diagnose Problem],*” I thought to myself.

Tinker (lv 3)
Problem tumbler not set

Huh? I was asking about the squeaky wheel, not the tumblers. I grunted in frustration and began to walk away before the realization finally hit me.

I immediately jumped back towards the safe and used the Skill again, trying my best to keep it constantly active. The same notification window stayed in my vision, but as I rotated the dial clockwise, the text began to change. As I hit the number 36, the notification

changed to read the following.

Tinker (lv 3) **Problem** Tumbler not set

“No fucking way.” I shook my head as I began to turn the dial counter-clockwise.

Tinker (lv 3) **Problem** Tumbler not set

It was official. The System was fucking broken. I let out a muffled laugh that was covered by the squeaking dial as I turned it until the notification changed once more.

Tinker (lv 3) **Problem** the inside of the combination dial’s rim

My wide grin began to slowly fade as another realization hit me. The System *really was* broken. Literally. Why else was [Detect Cheating]’s insanity-inducing passive kept on by default, or [Tinker]’s perks so inconsistent with how it was leveled? Why did Attributes rise wildly on some level ups but barely on others, or [Diagnose Problem] consider a safe doing its fucking job as a *problem*? The only explanation was that whatever hands put this thing together apparently suffered from Parkinson’s or degenerative Arthritis.

I didn’t know what to think of that, at least not now.

The only thing I could focus on was the stacks of hundred dollar bills sitting in the safe. I found a briefcase lying beside the desk and began to neatly fill it with the cash. I’d taken out about half of it, and arranged what was left to all sit in the front. None of it went into my pockets, however, just in case these bills were somehow traceable.

I didn’t know what was possible, and I wasn’t going to take any risks. Besides, I had two jobs now so money wasn’t an issue. As for the vault, hopefully it’d be some time before anyone noticed anything missing.

I got back up, kicked the safe door closed while turning the dial, and

made my way out the door. At the front, I found another woman dressed in the same gray pinstripe suit and purple tie as the other mobsters and threw the briefcase into her arms.

“What’s the fucking problem?” she shouted.

“Present for your boss, toots. Courtesy of Bruno.” I poured my Charisma into the line.

She unclasped it long enough to take a look inside, and after a short gasp, closed it shut and held it tightly to her chest. “The boss says thanks.”

I nodded back as she ran out the front door.

It was also fortunate that the people here didn’t ask questions when they were getting something out of it. But that was human nature to want good things to come, though leveraging Charisma didn’t hurt now that I knew how to. If this kept up, even the big boss would be a pushover!

“Excuse me sir, your tiramisu is ready!” came a cheer from behind me. It was the hostess, holding out a plate.

“Actually, I have something I need to get to. Could I get this to go?” I wasn’t about to stick around for one of the accountants to get back.

“Of course!”

I left the trattoria with the desert wrapped in a small plastic box. My only regret was that I wouldn’t be able to see that Bruno’s reaction, or how badly this would fuck the mob over. As I took a bite of my desert, I did have to admit; revenge was sweet.

[Level up! (8)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +0 | End: +0 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +2]

[Str: 13 | Con: 16 | End: 14 | Cha: 20 | Atr: 11 | Dex: 13 | Int: 18]

[Skill Obtained! Situational Awareness (lv 1)]

Chapter 35: Tax Fraud Aftermath

Five days later…

Heavy wheels rolled over the road towards their target. The men and few women who sat inside the vehicle simply stared forwards, their minds sharpened in incredible focus. This was another day on the job for them.

The armored truck slowed to a halt and all of the SWAT team's radio pieces crackled to life.

"Secure the building and find where all the documents are. You can be sure whoever's in charge will start destroying evidence as soon as they hear you, so detaining everyone is your first priority."

The armored police force nodded in unison.

"Move out!"

The back door of the armored truck was kicked open and the men and women of the Atlantic City Police, along with a special guest, stormed out and into the humble restaurant.

The guest, a man in his forties, held up a paper and shouted at the top of his lungs. "FBI! We have a warrant, on the ground!"

Vicci's Trattoria, on account of it being a money laundering front, had very few actual customers inside. They would've begun to scream or possibly even run around at the sight of so many guns pointed their way. Those that did occupy the restaurant's tables slowly lowered themselves to the ground, with scowls or looks of resignation.

A large squad stayed back to secure the room while the rest of the armored officers split up and continued into the back rooms and kitchen. The latter was cleared just as fast, save for a few angry chefs screaming about how their food would burn as they were tackled to the floor.

The forces who entered the back door, however, were met with a

different sight. They saw nobody. The only sound that could be heard was that of a faint humming coming from one of the rooms, and an occasional grinding that accompanied it.

“Oh god dammit, that’s a paper shredder!” shouted one of the officers as they rushed over to the door. “This is the FBI, open up!”

No answer.

The armored man kicked at the door, but it didn’t budge, or even begin to buckle or crack under his steel-toed boot.

Well, most of the door anyway. A small bit of the wood on the front chipped away, and when the officer dug at it, they found a slab of solid metal underneath.

“Go figure, a steel door to hide their documents,” quipped another one of the officers as she carried over a metal battering ram.

“*Go figure, a steel door,*” sarcastically mumbled the first officer to himself while he took the heavy metal tube by its handles.

“I’m going to have so much fun with you tonight,” the woman growled back.

The man rolled his eyes and began to pull the battering ram back, before slamming it into the door.

A dull thud echoed out through the restaurant, followed by another one as the ram was quickly shoved back into the steel. And another, and another.

“Thank god I got that thing installed,” came a voice from inside the room. “I should have all day to take care of business now!”

A crack began to form on the wall beside the door. With each and every slam of the battering ram, the crack only grew larger. Soon enough, it surrounded the entire door frame. With one final bash, the wall holding the door by its hinges collapsed and fell forward with a large clang.

“Don’t worry, we have all day to book you at the station!” exclaimed

the police officer, as his armored co-workers swarmed the room with guns drawn.

“Excuse me, but the back is for employees only,” said a woman dressed in the bank’s uniform.

“Police, we have a warrant,” replied the officer as they flashed their badge and a signed sheet of paper.

“O-oh! Please, go on through, then!” exclaimed the woman with a wide smile as she stepped aside.

The officers walked on through, with their hands on their holsters.

The woman simply walked back to her place, her grin still on her face.

“Hey!” whispered one of the tellers beside her. “The boss told us to warn her if the police come snooping!”

“Yeah, I know.”

The two continued to stand there, worry on one’s face and glee on the other’s. Half a minute later, they heard shouting coming from the back.

“Police, put your hands up!”

Bang

Bang

“Target down, but we’ve got a casualty! Requesting an ambulance!”

“Oh my god, what’s going on in there?!” asked the worried attendant, doing her best to keep her voice constrained to a hoarse whisper. It didn’t hide her fear.

“I don’t know, but I bet our union just gained a *lot* of bargaining power!”

Similar scenes occurred around town at various places of business. A few lone grunts even got arrested on the way to their jobs, including one particularly nasty man headed towards Karling apartments.

Many members of this secret mafia were being detained and brought into questioning, all led by a single man, who was going after the most important member of the organization by far. He was committed to bringing them down, no matter what.

“I’m vewy sowwy and vewy sad about this, can you pwease help me?”

Agent Hank Crimshaw sat across from an incredibly beautiful woman. She wore a crimson dress that parted heavily at the side, and revealed way too much cleavage to be considered appropriate to show in public, even for this world.

Hank had gone toe to toe with women, and even some men, who knew how to flaunt their bodies and wield it like a weapon. But they had all been subtle, careful not to reveal their cards too soon. Yet the woman in front of him was throwing around her sex appeal like an animal in heat! Did she really expect someone as high-ranking as Agent Hank Crimshaw of the FBI to fall for a display so obvious?

“Um, uh… well,” the agent began. He swore under his breath as the woman’s pupils dilated further than humanly possible. At least, that was what he thought he saw. ”I suppose there might be a bit of a misunderstanding from the higher ups. Maybe we could talk this through… over dinner?”

A bright smile grew on the woman’s lips. She parted them to reveal a row of pearl-white teeth as she let out a heartwarming laugh. “Of course, I would love to talk things through. Meet me at Enzo’s, just across the street? Tonight at eight?”

“I-I’d love to!”

Agent Hank Crimshaw turned around and made his way out of the casino. He would be lying if he said he was immune to feminine wiles, but he was always picky with who he chose to bed, they had to

make it worth his while if he was going to risk his job for them! And this woman in particular… she would be worth more than every other one combined. He felt it in his loins.

As he exited the building, he waved at the collected FBI and armored police officers waiting at the entrance. “We’re calling off the raid! We’ve got what we wanted!”

A few of the officers shifted, but the federal agent mostly placated them with a few gestures and vague explanations. Politics were much too common in high level investigations, and raids like these would periodically get canceled if the higher ups could get some kind of leverage somewhere else in the investigation by doing so. At least, most of the time. The officers present all hoped that was the case here.

“Cheers,” the woman said with a languid smile, as she lifted a flute of champagne.

Agent Hank Crimshaw, dressed in a fine suit, lifted his own glass and clinked it against hers. “You know, being able to clear out an entire restaurant for our date doesn’t really do you any favors in clearing your innocence. You really expect me to believe you’re just a humble businesswoman?”

The two sat at the back of Enzo’s, an Italian restaurant that required *connections* to even get a reservation… a month out. The entire building was deserted, save for the two diners and the kitchen and wait staff.

“But Agent Crimshaw,” began the woman with a pout. She wore the same red dress as earlier that day, but with visibly less underneath it.

“Please, call me Hank.” The agent put on his swavest smile, which looked like it would be more at home on a bulldog’s face.

“But Hank, I’m just trying my best to be a good hostess. Won’t you please give me a chance?”

“That’s what this dinner date is, my dear!” He gave a wink. “But I

was able to get a good look at the evidence we collected, and it really doesn't look good for you."

"Really? How so?" She let out a small gasp as she held her hand to her mouth.

Agent Crimshaw swore in his mind. He knew she was just mocking him at this point with her gestures, but he couldn't help but take the bait, it was as if he was compelled to lap up her poison.

The man took a sip of his drink before responding. "We've got plenty of your people in custody and ready to testify, along with plenty of documents we seized at Vicci's trattoria. All locked up tight at our office in Newark!" He let out a little chuckle.

"Oh, I see. But why are you helping little old me out like this? You could get into trouble with your boss!" the woman said with blatantly fake astonishment.

"Eh, we've got sort of an unofficial 'budget' for this kind of thing," the man shrugged. "And if they want to make a big deal about what I'm doing, I've got enough dirt on them to do the same. Besides, they would've tried to get with a beauty like you if I actually brought you in."

"Wow, so brave!" The woman let out another laugh, but the languidness in her voice quickly dried up as it turned to a sharp mirth. "And so foolish, just like everyone else."

"Now that was just rude! How do you expect me to help you out if you treat me like this?"

"You already have helped me! I know where you have my people and the evidence, so I'm going to go and take it now."

"From the FBI building?" the agent wheezed. "You're just a small-time mobster, what are *you* going to do?"

"For starters, this."

"This wha-" Hank's throat began to close and caught the word before it could leave his mouth. "What did you do?!" he managed to

whimper.

“Seriously, what kind of people are running this circus?” Whatever sultry effect she had in her voice had entirely evaporated, replaced with harsh annoyance. “I poisoned you, dumbass!”

The man dropped his glass, and it shattered as soon as it hit the lightly carpeted floor. He tried to speak, but not a single sound left his lips. It didn’t take long before he joined the champagne flute on the floor as life left his body.

“Hey, at least I made sure the poison would kill you before you suffocated, consider that my small mercy of the day.” The woman clapped twice. “Get in here, assholes!”

Several hulking men, dressed in gray suits with purple ties, came into the room from the kitchen entrance and nodded. “What do you need, Donna Victoria?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked, pointing at the dead body. “Dispose of our little FBI agent here, and make sure nobody finds it.”

“Yes ma’am!” the three of them cried out before picking up the corpse. One of them turned back towards his boss and let curiosity get the best of him. “Uh, FBI agent? Was killing him really a good idea?”

“I’ve got some friends on high who can divert any heat that comes my way. They’ll need to if they want me to deliver on my end of our bargain and not ‘accidentally’ blab to the feds about *their* plans.”

The brute was smart enough not to question further, he knew when he was wandering into dangerous territory. The three henchmen picked up the body and began to carry it out of the restaurant through the back. Several screams erupted from the kitchen as they walked through it, and Victoria sighed to herself. She wasn’t worried about them, a quick pep talk and some money would make them forget what they saw.

“My wardens are getting too predictable,” she said with tired eyes. “If they wanted to make me suffer, they would have someone *competent*

leading the show."

She looked at a little notebook left behind by the now dead agent and began to rummage through it.

"But what exactly happened there?" Victoria mumbled to herself as she poked at a bolded and circled name: Vicci's Trattoria, with last week's date. "The two in charge of the books ran away before I realized what happened there, and I somehow doubt that they actually betrayed me. No, somebody else has to be responsible for this."

She leaned back and closed her eyes, regretting being too paranoid to install security cameras in the numbers room.

"But whoever tipped the feds off and leaked all of those documents is more than competent, and it isn't someone part of my organization." Victoria quickly opened her eyes and flashed a grizzly smile. "So one of the demons in charge finally shows its face! I'll finally get my revenge."

Silence echoed throughout the restaurant, leaving the woman standing in the lone spotlight.

"Donna Victoria," she repeated as she giggled to herself. "I'm not even Italian!"

Chapter 36: Ultarian Festival Week

For having caused possibly untold financial destruction to a bloodthirsty criminal organization that would have my head if they knew about it, I slept like a baby. But to be fair, it wasn't the craziest thing that happened to me since I arrived in this strange world.

I woke up at 6:55 am, a few minutes before my alarm could ring, and greeted the day with a placid smile. Getting ready was quick and easy too, with the bathroom trip and instant coffee already feeling routine. The morning was going perfectly. That's how I knew things were about to go wrong.

Thunk

A massive pile of booklets slammed onto Hiroi's desk as the short old man looked at me with a kind smile.

"Uh… those are a lot of manuals, boss," I said while standing inside the apartment complex' main office.

"Indeed! It's Ultarian's Festival Week, so a lot of people are more *active* around their homes, which means things tend to break. For someone like you though, you should be finished in only a few hours!"

"Festival Week?" I asked.

"Don't tell me you didn't celebrate when you were a kid?" He shot me an offended look. "It's when we try to have as much fun as we can so new stories can be made from it to please Ulatrian!"

"Yeah, well…" I took a deep breath. "You know how I said I needed more experience?"

Hiroi slowly nodded. His smile stood, but it looked rigid. The man had been through enough to know where this was going.

"I was able to get another job at one of the local casinos!" I cheered. The wind flew out of my sails when I saw that my boss hadn't reacted

at all. “I’ll be finding cheaters as part of security. It’s normally supposed to be at night, but there’s a tournament going on this week that starts at nine.”

“Right, you said as much,” the old man finally nodded. “Wasn’t that what Eunice said you were originally going for but didn’t feel comfortable with? Why the sudden change? Is being a handyman too boring?”

“No, absolutely not, it’s perfect!” I shot back with a raised voice. I noticed I was standing on my toes, and got back down to my normal height. “Sorry, I mean, it’s perfect. It’s honestly everything I wanted out of a job, actually.” I sighed. “But with the mob, and the racket they’ve got you in, I feel it’s my only way of doing something to stop them. I really don’t think I can explain it, but working at a casino will give me what I need to put those sons of bitches down for good.”

Hiroi looked at me with a curious expression, but as he read the sincerity on my face, he gave me a knowing smile. “Very well then. I can’t say I know what you’re trying to do, but I know that you mean it. By the way, where did you get hired anyway?”

“At Goldshanks’ casino.”

“Goldshanks, huh?” Hiroi rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I’ve heard of him. He’s a lot nicer than the other big names on the strip, and actually treats his employees with respect! But they don’t really have the same camaraderie that most others do. You see, they don’t have sex with each other, so they’re not as close. The atmosphere always seemed too artificial to me so I never went there.”

“Really now?” My lips twitched upwards for a second. Only in this world would something like that be considered normal. Before I could think up a better response, Hiroi continued.

“Anyway, you still have a job with me, and if you really need to make it there so early, you’ll need to finish your work here first. This is my policy for my employees, and you’re no exception. That means you have to fix all of these before you get going.” He pointed at the pile sitting on his desk.

The old man didn't look angry or vindictive, but he was firm. A man with convictions as strong as these was someone I couldn't put up much of a fight against. I let out a short sigh. "I understand. So where's my first stop?"

I walked up to the door and softly rapped on it. Sitting at the front of the apartment complex was Building A, which was made up of several individual units stacked on top of and beside each other. I had to climb a small set of stairs to get to this particular apartment.

After a few seconds, the door opened and I was greeted by a young woman with shoulder-length brown hair wearing a long, white bathrobe. She held herself with a brazen confidence, as if the world was a play and she had written the script. With a cocked hip that leaned on the doorframe and a come-hither smile, she let loose a seductive smile, beckoning me.

"So you must be the repairman, huh?" she asked, eyeing me up and down. "I just stepped out of the shower, I hope you don't mind if I'm like this-"

"Ma'am, please just show me what's broken," I said without blinking. This wasn't my first rodeo, after all.

"…f-follow me," she replied with a barely noticeable stutter. However, she quickly caught herself and led me inside.

We made our way several feet into the short corridor the apartment opened up into and made a sharp left into the kitchen. The woman pointed towards the refrigerator and gave me a nod.

I walked up to the device and opened it up, feeling a blast of stale cool air blow past my face, a world of difference from the crisp and warm early morning summer air just outside. But besides that, everything seemed to be fine. My mind was somewhat addled thanks to the stress of having somewhere to be soon and the relatively early hour, so I knew I was missing *something,* but what?

The woman had regained her hungry eyes in the time it took for us to reach her kitchen, but looking at me stare at her refrigerator in

confusion made morph into a mild discomfort. “Uh… the light’s broken.”

My eyes went wide, and if I wasn’t in someone’s company, I would have slapped myself on the face. Instead, I kept my composure and calmly replied. “Yup, I knew that. Just trying to figure out what could be the cause.”

“Maybe it’s-”

“[Diagnose Problem],” I whispered to myself as I activated the ability.

Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem
Refrigerator Light
Burnt out Bulb

“-the lightbulb? It’s pretty old and could have just burnt out?” the woman finished.

“Yeah, could be,” I nonchalantly replied while reaching for a spare in my toolbox.

It took me all but fifteen seconds to replace it, and when I was done, the fridge was working as good as new.

“Wow, you sure do know how to handle… small and delicate objects.”

I cocked my eyebrow at her for a moment before just accepting the compliment and nodding. “Glad to be of help! If that’s everything, then I’ll just get going-”

“Hold on, there’s also my dryer!” she quickly exclaimed, before grabbing my hand and leading me to the device in question.

Most of the apartments in this complex were well-kitted enough to have their own washer and dryer, and this one was no exception.

Just down a short hallway from the kitchen was a closet that contained the pair of appliances in question, both of them situated on the floor with barely an inch of space between them. There was a small shelf over the washer that held detergent and dryer sheets,

while the space above the dryer was empty. In fact, it looked like there used to be a shelf or some other object attached to the wall from the lighter spots, but whatever had been there was long gone.

The surprise of being grabbed and dragged, even if it was gently and over a short distance, helped to jolt me ever more awake. Enough so that I'd preemptively called forth my Skill.

Tinker (lv 3): Diagnose Problem
Device Dryer
Issue Burned Motor

"Motor's broken, huh?" I mumbled out loud.

"Yeah, actually!" the woman said with surprise at my sudden clarity. "From… overuse."

"Alright, let me get to it, then." I slowly pulled the unit out of its alcove in the wall and began to get to work.

It took some time to squeeze into the small space between the dryer and the closet's back wall, and even longer to take apart the back of the device to access the motor, but I'd eventually taken it out and cleaned it with a cotton swab and some lubricant.

In the background, I could hear the faint strike of matches and a record player playing smooth jazz. Mostly fitting music for my success, but I wouldn't celebrate until I was actually done.

With one final motion, I stuck the motor back into the dryer and hooked up the belt to its shaft. After screwing the back on and doing a quick test run, I smiled and let out a sigh of relief.

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 3 -> 4]

The grin forming on my face immediately fell. [Tinker] was a strange Skill. Not in how it worked, because that was predictable, but in what specifically caused it to level. "No, no…"

"Oh, you got the dryer working again?" asked the woman from her living room in a sultry voice. "How wonderful, now come here for your reward."

I slowly dragged my feet through the carpeted corridor, trying to draw out the motion as long as I could. My face wore a dead expression as I rounded the corner and looked to a sight straight out of a dream.

“So for your prize, I’ll let you do anything you want with me,” said the woman with a wink as she let go of her gown and let it fall to the floor, revealing her utterly nude form.

“Really, anything now?” I slowly asked. “Did I fix everything that was broken?”

“You sure did,” she replied with a predatory grin. “Now how about I fix something for you?”

“Well in that case, I want you… to let me go. I’ve got more apartments to service, and I have somewhere I need to be.”

“In that case… wait, what?”

“You said everything’s fixed, so I’m going to get going now. Bye!” I quickly turned around and made my way to the front door.

Just as I touched the door handle, I felt a hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, I saw the same woman standing there with her other hand on her hip and giving me a childish pout.

“What gives?!” she asked. “I’ve been flirting with you since you got here, and you ignored every single one of my advances. And now that you’ve got a naked woman right in front of you who wants you to have your way with her, and you just ignore her? What’s your problem?!”

“Well for starters, I ignored your advances on purpose,” I started, a similar looking pout forming on my own face. “And as for my problem, I’ve got three.”

She looked at me as confusion began to seep into her gaze, but her frustration held, urging me to elaborate.

“First, I’m busy and I have to get through all of these fixes quickly. I have somewhere *very* important I need to be and I can’t wait.”

“Important enough to ignore *this*?” she asked, pointing at her form.

“Yes,” I deadpanned. “And second, pleasing you isn’t my job. I really *am* just the handyman, not the apartment gigolo. Hiroi hasn’t hired a replacement yet.”

Her lips fell, and the pout dissolved, only leaving confusion and a dose of surprise. “Wait, you aren’t? But Glinda said that there’s a new man around, and that it was you!”

I silently swore to myself. She *knew* I was just a handyman, but that didn’t stop the old lady from spreading those stupid rumors.

“Well alright, it isn’t your job to please me, but why wouldn’t you want to anyway? Am I ugly or something?” she asked, hurt. “And what’s problem three?”

“Problem three is that you’re married, and I know your husband.”

Every emotion on the woman’s face disappeared, and all that was left was a silent horror.

“Please don’t tell him,” she whispered.

I was tempted to tell her off then and there, but there was a look of desperation about her that made me hesitate.

“It’s Ultarian Festival week, and his job doesn’t count it as a holiday so he’s still going in! I’m desperate, and I don’t know what else to do!”

“And that’s why your dryer’s motor got jammed?”

“Uh, yeah. I don’t have any toys, so it was the next best thing.”

This was a strange world. After waking up in the body of another man with a magical System, I thought I was given a second chance on life. I still felt that way, but… it was complicated. In that wherever I ended up apparently ran on porn logic, and the System was entirely geared towards getting me laid. For example, while the [Tinker] Skill worked on just about any machine, it only leveled up whenever I fixed a device that had a sexual purpose. Case in point, the dryer.

“I know I asked too much of you, but I don’t want the relationship with my husband to get worse!”

This place would’ve been a dream come true for a lot of people, but for me, it was a wet nightmare. A debauched lifestyle wasn’t something I was interested in. I knew what the rabbit hole of vice would lead to, and I wasn’t jumping in. So I did what any hopefully sane person would do, and tried to live normally.

It was hard.

But it was something. And before me was one of the things that made it hard. No, not like that!

“I’ll tell your husband… to take some time off to spend with you. I think he might listen to me if I ask nicely.” With the System.

The woman’s face began to warm as a smile slowly spread across her lips. “Thank you.”

I nodded and turned around, leaving the apartment and heading to the next tenant in need of help.

But I had to admit, the strangest part of this world was that so many of the biggest problems could have easily been solved with just a few words, yet almost nobody bothered. Of all of the nonsense I’d experienced since coming here, this was one that kept me wary.

Chapter 37: Ultarian's Witness

The rest of my morning on the job went by surprisingly fast, and a lot more comfortably. There was usually only one small thing to repair in each apartment, and the residents didn't try to hit on me, at least not as forcefully as the first one. I was getting through things quickly enough, and I was certain I'd finish in time to make it to the casino before nine. I would've been happier about it, but…

"Hey, can you fix my dishwasher? It's got chunks of melted plastic from my… toys in it. Again."

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 4 -> 5]

"My countertop chipped off when my husband dropped me onto it when we were doing- yeah, can you just glue it back on or something?"

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 5 -> 6]

"You would not *believe* what happened to my microwave!"

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 6 -> 7]

Every time the notification chimed in my head, I felt a small dopamine rush that was quickly overridden by sheer disgust at the implication of each level up. Hiroi wasn't wrong about how crazy this Ultarian Festival week was. In just one morning, I'd made more progress in the [Tinker] Skill than I had all of last week! But the cost…

I was wearing a thick pair of heavy duty gloves. I'd put them on after the second level up, but I felt the sheer ick factor of being indirectly involved in so many other peoples' sex lives practically seeped through the tough rubber barrier. Not to say that there weren't *actual* substances that might've done just that.

So much so that after servicing the last apartment, I made a beeline back to my own place, just so I could take another shower. I unlocked the door and charged in, tossing my gloves into the trash can and

jumping straight into the shower.

The alarm clock in my room read 8:30 as I came in. That left me with thirty minutes to clean up and drive over, so I didn't even bother to fully close the bathroom door, let alone lock it, as I threw off my clothes and jumped into the torrent of hot, cleansing water.

Even if I was only in there for five minutes, I used up a good quarter of a fresh bar of soap as I forcefully lathered it against my arms. My frantic scrubbing was able to remove the lathered layer and leave me feeling squeaky clean by the end of it, at least enough that I felt confident going out in public.

So it was quite a surprise that when I put on my clothes and stepped out to my apartment, I already had an audience.

"Uh, hello there, sir!" meekly exclaimed a young man.

He had on a white button up shirt and tan khakis, while on his neck was a bright red tie with orange and yellow diagonal stripes across it and purple flowers dotting the fabric. His head was a bushy mess of curly black hair that rested on a pasty looking face that held a shy expression. His left hand held a book with an embroidered quill, while his right was slowly waving to me.

"You, uh… left your front door open, and I wanted to say hello!"

I couldn't remember if I'd locked or closed the front door.

"I was hoping you would like to hear the holy word of Ultarian! This *is* his festival week, after all!"

I couldn't come up with a proper response, at least not immediately. Several things were going through my mind which left it a sudden jumble. The rush of needing to get to Goldshanks' casino if I didn't want to be late, the shock of knowing that this stranger came into my home *while I was in the shower,* and who- who was he?

Obviously he was some kind of door to door missionary or something, trying to spread the not-so holy word. But something about it seemed odd. Beyond him barging into my home.

“Now’s not a good time, and I need to get going, so get out of my house,” I said while walking towards him with furrowed brows. I trusted my gut, and it wanted this guy out of here as soon as possible.

“I’m sure you’d love to hear the Good Word!” he replied. While he still looked just as meek, he didn’t seem to react to my utter refusal at all.

“Seriously, I’m late, and why would you enter my place without an invitation? I don’t even know you!”

“Taking Ultarian into your heart will bring you every joy you could ever dream of!” the pasty faced man continued. I could’ve sworn that he looked a little taller than a second ago, by about an inch or two. He was standing straight.

“Ultarian’s brought me nothing but misery since I got here, so if you don’t mind, get the *fuck* out of my-” I reached my hand to grab his shoulder, but as soon as I was within a foot of him, his right hand flew and grabbed my wrist.

“I see you are a lost child of our Lord.” The look of meekness had dropped from his face, and it instead held a dead expression. His eyes were empty, and mouth curved into the barest of a frown, the kind you’d find on a corpse.

I tried to wrestle out of the young man’s grip, but even putting all of my weight into my arm wasn’t enough to make him budge. I even used my other hand to budge at it, and when that didn’t work, I curled it into a fist and struck at his stomach.

He took it unblinking, and continued to stand there like a stone statue. It wasn’t natural.

“Uh, please leave. You’re not welcome here. Begone, begone, begone!” My greatest fears borne from when I first arrived in this world finally became manifest, just when I’d forgotten about them. I threw everything I knew about the supernatural at the wall in some hail mary attempt at getting this… *thing* to leave. Remind it that it wasn’t welcome, as if it was some kind of vampire that needed an invitation. Tell it to get lost three times in a row, like it were some

kind of fey or fairy. I read you had to tell them something three times to make it *really* stick.

“You’ve been unruly, and not just with the words you keep to yourself,” he said, continuing to stand there with those same dead eyes. “But you shared your blasphemy at His holy site, at his church. Your punishment will be for that.”

“Punishment? Who are you?! I-”

His left hand slammed the book into my chest and sent me flying backwards. I didn’t even feel the impact as I hit the bathroom door, ripping it off its hinges and tumbling to the ground.

When I finally came to, I could barely walk. It took me a solid minute to get myself off the ground and everything around me looked terrible. The bathroom door was smashed and the white tiles were covered in wood chips. The shower’s tub and toilet were thankfully intact, and so was my skin from any splinters.

That wasn’t to say my body was in one piece. Even though I had no broken bones, my chest ached with a terrible pain that I knew would purple into a nasty bruise. A few of my ribs felt sprained enough that it hurt whenever I walked.

And when I walked into my bedroom, I saw the worst sight of all. The time was 9:10.

My hair was a mess, my clothes were slightly torn, and I could barely move. And I was already late.

I let out a slow exhale. It was unsteady, mixed in with a wheeze, and towards the end, a sob.

This was the second time I’d experienced the supernatural, yet it wasn’t the first time something like *this* had happened in my life. Where all of my best efforts fell through because of one event, that might not have even been my fault.

I knew it wouldn’t be the last.

So now that it had happened again, there were only two things I

could do. The first choice was to give up. With bleary eyes, I shuffled over to my bedroom and sat down on the bed.

I faced towards my dresser and took out a spare change of clothes. With a series of slow, painful movements, I slowly took off what I was wearing and put on the new set. Every motion was excruciating, but I fought through it. I had the opportunity of a lifetime, and even as it began to slip through my fingers, I wasn't going to let it fall all the way through. As long as there was the tiniest sliver still in my palm…

Finally fully dressed, I made my way outside and headed towards my car. But not without first making sure I locked the front door and poured a line of salt across it.

Chapter 38: Tournament Preparations

Today sucked. That was most days I was here, but this morning was especially awful. An unexpectedly gross time fixing things, a horrifically violent run-in with some kind of Ultarian's Witness, and the aftermath of that so-called preaching.

"Ow, ow, ow," I winced as I drove over a series of speed bumps. If I'd gone down to five miles per hour and went over them normally, I'd be fine. But seeing as how I was starting fifteen minutes already late, I didn't have that kind of luxury.

The front of my car made a terrible thud and short grinding sound as it impacted the asphalt and overloaded my suspension for an instant. That couldn't be good, but with the kind of money Goldshanks was offering me for this job, I'd be able to get my car repaired. And hopefully my body with the kind of damage I took from that hit. God knew I needed a doctor for all of this.

I tore asphalt as I rushed to the casino and miraculously found a parking spot close by. The employee lot was apparently full, despite there being nowhere near that many people actively working at the casino the last two times I was there. I got out of my car while panting and headed inside.

"I'm not sure what I should be more disappointed in. The fact that you're late on your first day or that you bothered to show up at all." A familiar woman in the casino's signature green dress greeted me with a sneer.

"Hi Kamila," I said back in between breaths while clutching my chest. "I have no excuses, I had a prior commitment that I forgot to address beforehand, as well as… an accident. It won't happen again, though."

She let out a snort. "Whatever, just follow me. You need to get fitted for your suit. We can't have you representing Mr. Goldshanks in *that.*"

I looked down at my soft faded jeans and t-shirt and internally cringed at my choice in clothing. It was the easiest thing to put on

despite my injuries, but I should've thought about what would look appropriate. I just kept quiet and followed my co-worker out the door of the casino and to a nearby storefront across the street.

I stood in my boxers with my arms outstretched while a middle-aged woman dutifully gauged my dimensions with a tape measure. She was quick and professional, not even mentioning the light shade of maroon my chest was beginning to take on. Once she was done, she went to the back and returned within ten minutes with a sharp-looking white suit.

"I wasn't able to give it the full works, but it should be enough for what your boss wants," she said to me as I took the clothes off her hands. "Something about appearing unimportant enough to not attract attention?"

"Yeah, that sounds like him," I replied. "He had me do my job interview dressed like this."

"In your underwear?!"

"Oh, no!" I quickly corrected her. "I did it in what I was wearing when I first came in here."

"Well that makes more sense," she said with a sigh of relief. "And I'm guessing he's not the cause of that awful bruise?"

"Nope," I replied. "Just an accident at home before coming here."

"How dedicated! I can't imagine anyone moving around with something like that, let alone get fitted! I hope it doesn't hurt too much."

"Well it did at first, but I guess not as much now- ow!"

The tailor gently poked at the bruise and outlined an odd shape. "Well, maybe that should be a sign that there are good things to come for you despite it? I'm sure it'll make a wonderful story."

"Huh?"

“There, that part of your bruise kind of looks like Ultarian’s mark! I think you should take this as a blessing!”

I remembered that the young man hit me with Ultarian’s holy book, which had the mark embroidered into it. But would a bit of raised string affect the bruise like that? “Uh yeah, I’ll look at it like that.”

I soon got my suit and headed back to the casino after putting it on.

The fitting was rushed, and as a result, the white suit the seamstress put me in looked cheap. All the better if I was to blend in inconspicuously. It would do, and I walked back to the casino with a smile.

We were greeted at the front entrance by a pair of well-dressed, burly bouncers standing in front of several gaudy posters advertising the tournament inside. The two weren’t there before, but looked as if they’d been guarding those doors all their lives. After seeing Kamila leading the way, they nodded and ushered us inside.

Now that I was no longer in a rush, I was able to get a good look at the place. Several large tables covered in green felt were placed around the main casino floor, which had been cleared of its previous furniture. Several chairs surrounded the poker tables, and several more were neatly arranged in front of rising bleachers set up in the corner by the slot machines. The side seats were almost entirely empty, save for a few filled with a mix of men and women in both suits and casual wear. The ones around the tables were almost entirely filled with some very nervous looking people.

In one of the corners, a group of people fussed with a camera and boom microphone, while one of their members stood and watched the others with an impatient frown.

My eyes were beginning to get lost in the scenery, when a sharp voice called out.

“Mike!”

I turned around to see a short man with curly brown hair look at me

with a frown.

“You’re tardy, Mike,” said Todd, the head of security, with crossed eyebrows. “You show up even a few minutes late for the tournament, and some cheater could get away with millions of dollars they don’t deserve.”

“Sorry, it won’t happen again,” I replied carefully, trying to defuse the man’s temper. “Looks like it hasn’t started yet, at least.”

“That’s no excuse, Mike,” he retorted in a huff. “Your job is to patrol the casino floor while I keep an eye on the cameras from the security room. Since you’re just a consultant, don’t go confronting any cheaters yourself. Just tell a bouncer and they’ll take care of things.”

“Sure,” I said with a smile. “That’s what I was planning on doing anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter what you were planning,” Todd’s eye twitched for an instant. “Mr. Goldshanks put me in charge of you and everyone else working security, including the bouncers and anyone else the other sponsors sent. We can’t have a smooth running ship if its captain can’t get everyone to do what he needs them to!”

“A-alright, man,” I sputtered with raised hands. “I got you, I’ll do what you say, boss.”

“Good.” Todd looked at me with a fierce smile that quickly faded into a fatigued frown. He put his hand to his forehead and sighed. “Sorry, Mike. I’m under a lot of stress to get everything off without a hitch, sorry for showing it on you.”

“Hey, it’s alright man, don’t worry about it,” I replied quickly. “I’m only here to make your life easier, so feel free to tell me what you think will take the most weight from your shoulders.”

Todd dragged his hand down his face and stretched his back before looking at me. “Thanks Mike, I’ll remember to do that. Go catch some cheaters.”

“I will,” I replied with a grin.

“Oh yeah, and here’s a badge that says you work with us. You weren’t here for orientation so I couldn’t give it to you earlier,” said Todd, tossing me a laminated card on a lanyard.

“Thanks,” I replied with a nod, putting the id around my neck and making my way to a better vantage point.

“And Mike?”

I turned around to look back at Todd.

“Happy Ultarian Festival.” The man gave me a quick wave and headed to the back.

I nodded and balefully repeated the words before looking towards the throngs of people sitting around the tables. It was showtime.

Chapter 39: Tournament Arc!!! …But I'm just the security

It was the big day, dozens of men and women would be coming together to fight for the chance at millions of dollars. Dreams would be fulfilled and crushed, and I would be standing above them all, the wielder of their fates.

"So you gonna take a look at the place?" asked a bouncer as he tapped my shoulder. "We've looked over everything, but you're the expert, so you should probably take a quick peek."

I flinched in pain before I turned my head and leered at the man for having touched a particularly sensitive spot… and interrupted my internal megalomaniacal monologue.

He paled in response.

"Yeah, you're right. Thanks," I said with a sigh, making my way around the play area.

With five minutes until the tournament started, there wasn't much for me to do. Especially since [Detect Cheating] didn't work when there wasn't any actual cheating going on.

Eventually, the remaining time passed and the ceiling lights began to dim.

At the side of the building were several men and women standing together and facing one in particular. One of them operated a large camera mounted on a rotating platform, while another gripped a large, fuzzy microphone suspended from a long rod, and the last of them simply stood in front of the group with a gorgeous smile plastered across his face.

"Alright boss, get ready," said the lady operating the camera to the man standing in front of it. "We're live in 3, 2, 1…"

"Hello ladies and gentlemen!" cooed the man in a rich and silky voice. "We're coming to you live from the World Poker Series

Invitational Tournament! I'm your host, Jerry Chetman with the National Poker Network, and this is the Goldshanks Casino in Atlantic City! Today is the first day of the biggest Poker event of the year, and hundreds of professionals have gathered here this week for a chance to walk away with a portion of the ten million dollar prize pool! And what better day to kick things off than the start of Ultarian Festival Week!"

I regarded the trio with raised eyebrows. I wasn't exactly much of a poker fan, so why not let the TV crew give me the info dump? I deserved *some* kind of break after my morning.

The anchorman, Jerry Chetman, continued. "Since this is only the first day, the attendants present here were selected out of those who only barely qualified, so they're going to be spending today proving their mettle to see if they have what it takes to compete with the very best! So get ready, ladies and gentlemen, as we see for ourselves which one of these wannabe pros has what it takes to play in the big leagues!"

Soon after the announcer finished his speech, the tournament finally began in earnest. Dealers began shuffling and distributing cards, players put on their best poker faces, and chips began flying between hands. As I stood in my little corner of the room, I regarded them all, trying to make out any suspicious behavior or any other telltale sign of cheating.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 1 -> 2]

Hold on, shouldn't I have gotten a level up in [Detect Cheating] instead? Wait…

I slapped my hand against my forehead as I realized the obvious and activated the Skill. Seriously, you'd think my high Intelligence would let me remember such a simple detail. But on the other hand, it was probably better that my attributes didn't run passively. I knew what they were like when they had their way. I didn't need something like *that* to autopilot my brain.

Immediately, my vision filled up with rows upon rows of tables as wave after wave of notifications competed for my attention. It felt

overwhelming at first and I could've sworn I was about to get a nosebleed from the mental assault, but I was able to tune out the worst of it and focused the Skill on the individual players in front of me.

That was apparently new, kind of like a lesser version of [Detect Cheating]'s passive version, but entirely useless since I couldn't actually make out what any of the tables were saying or who it was pointing towards when there were so many.

As my eyes jumped between each player in a clear and focused pattern, individual menu boxes popped up in my vision. Names, methods, it all flew past me, but most of it wasn't exactly relevant.

Detect Cheating (lv 7)
Target Jacqui Parker
Method Count time work ends for secret rendezvous

Sounded like he was cheating on his spouse or whatever, not cheating at cards. Alright, onto the next player.

Detect Cheating (lv 7)
Target Lucy Martin
Method Secret phone calls while husband was out

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 7 -> 8]

Alright, more of the same, nothing interesting. But that was a really fast level up, what was up with that? Maybe it was because the Skill was finally telling me *how* they were doing it instead of just a yes or no? I only got level ups beforehand when I was able to figure out the method of cheating, so maybe this perk was doing that for me? It felt kind of like cheating though… or just poor design. Though to be fair, this entire System was poorly designed.

Detect Cheating (lv 8)
Target Kaiya Suarez
Method N/A

Oh would you look at that! Someone clean.

Detect Cheating (lv 8)
Target Levine
Method babysitter to make time

Ok, now that was just irresponsible! How was their kid going to feel when they found out that daddy would rather spend time with his mistress instead? *'Hey sport, you want me to play catch with you? I'd love to, but I'd rather catch some pussy!'*

I shook my head in frustration. This was ridiculous! How was I supposed to find someone who was cheating at cards when almost *everyone* was lighting up under my skill?

Growing frustrated, my gaze began to wander away from the casino floor and towards the guest seats off to the side. Most were still relatively empty, but my eyes locked in on one viewer in particular. It was a man that seemed to be in his mid thirties, with a look on his face halfway between a scowl and a snarky grin. But that wasn't what caught my attention. It was his clothes.

He wore a suit and pants made entirely of a gaudy red velvet that made looking at him feel like staring into the sun. My brain just couldn't comprehend how someone could simultaneously look like a pimp, a businessman, and ready to go to sleep.

The man's eyebrows shot up and he turned his head to directly face me. I immediately turned back to the casino floor and winced, and somehow, my gaze landed right onto a man's sleeve. There was something sticking out of it, a piece of blue cardstock, opposed to the red cards the casino was using.

I swore at the man in red, cursing him for making me almost miss this cheater.

Detect Cheating (lv 8)
Target Kirby
Method up his sleeve

Bingo!

I casually made my way to one of the bouncers and pointed out the

man in question, which earned me a light nod and a front row to the action. The hulking gentleman I'd informed, who wore a sharp black suit with the casino's logo on a plastic tag on his lapel, casually made his way to the guilty party and gently tapped his shoulder.

After whispering something into his ear, Royce slowly got up with a slump. Before the cheater could turn towards the exit, he quickly contorted his torso to deliver a sucker punch. Luckily, the bouncer saw it coming and nimbly dodged out of the way, letting the blue cards stuffed inside the man's sleeve to go flying across the floor.

That was all the excuse the other security guards needed to run at the man and tackle him to the ground, the small audience gasping in surprise at the uncouth behavior before them, as the rest of the players at the table disregarded their now-disqualified competitor. I didn't blame them, one less competitor meant a better chance for each of them to win.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 8 -> 9]

"Would you look at that, ladies and gentlemen!" exclaimed Jerry Chetman directly into the camera. "It looks like there was a cheater hiding amongst the competitors! It's a darn shame that he had to sully the good name of professional poker with a move like that. And with the wrong brand of cards, no less! He's not just a shame to poker, he's a shame to cheaters! And cheaters are already a shame to society, so what does that make him?" He let out a soft chuckle.

I looked at the announcer with a cocked eyebrow.

Detect Cheating (lv 9)
Target Jerry Chetman
Method Meet news van at night for rendezvous

Yeah, just making sure. It was always the loudest ones, wasn't it?

Chapter 40: Employee Conflict Mediation

“Eye spy with my little eye…” I said as I rubbed my temples. It’d been several hours, and I only had a single bathroom break in that time. [Detect Cheating] was working overtime alongside me and had already caught half a dozen people so far.

With the new level ups, finding and catching people felt a little easier, as if the Skill was guiding my eyes right to them. Of course, there were the occasional- ok, overly common relationship cheater, but the process still felt much more efficient. As such…

“Right over there, cheater number five.”

Detect Cheating (lv 11)
Target Valentine
Method cards

It sounded simple enough, but when I leaned over the rope barrier to get a better look, I couldn’t see anything different about her cards. Same brand, same patterns, was it some kind of false alarm? I frowned. Jessica looked way too confident for her to *not* be cheating, especially with how the other competitors at her table were sweating bullets. She just closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and threw down her chips.

Wait a minute…

I closed my own eyes and took a deep breath. The smell of sweat filled my nostrils, and I was about to take a step back at the pungent odor that I would’ve expected from a children’s card game tournament, but something made me stop. There was something else mixed in with the scents, something sweet.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 2 -> 3]

I slowly waded into the play area while holding up my lanyard. When I made it to Jessica’s table, I peered over her shoulder to look at her cards. They all looked plain.

She saw my intrusion and held them tightly to her chest, the action blowing air towards my face. And along with it, a whiff of perfume.

I closed my eyes and sniffed around. Several of the cards held strong aromas, along with her left hand. She must've been marking the cards with different perfumes in order to tell who had good cards in their hand!

My eyes widened in bewilderment as I walked back to the outer area and got hold of one of the bouncers. His reaction to this revelation was about the same.

"You want me to do what?!" he asked, surprised.

"Sniff her left hand. Or the cards in the deck," I said slowly, unable to hide the discomfort from my own voice. "She's marking the good ones with perfume."

"Damn, how can you even tell from a simple walk-by?" asked the bouncer apprehensively. "You know what? I don't want to know, we'll take care of this."

I watched as the burly man and several of his compatriots approached the cheater in question. After some awkward conversation, one of them actually grabbed her hand and took a huge whiff, and another did the same to the deck of cards.

"Yup, they're both covered in perfume!" confirmed the smeller. "My super sniffer never lies!"

And with that, they escorted the woman from the table. I, along with the rest of the audience, stared at her as she left the building, meeting her utter indignation with our total bafflement. I could've sworn I'd seen something like this on TV as a kid.

"And with that, ladies and gentlemen, we've concluded the first day of the tournament. Thank you all for tuning in, and we'll see you tomorrow." Jerry Chetman, the TV announcer, took a deep breath as the camera cut.

Just in time, too. I was starting to reach my limit.

As the competitors began to file out of the casino, I made my way to a little corner where someone had set up a table full of food. It was full of breakfast items when I first arrived, but I didn't have time to enjoy any since I was late. But now, there was nothing to stop me from taking what was rightfully mine! Except, of course, the table being picked clean.

Several bagels, from plain to poppy, along with an empty pint tub of cream cheese and single-use packets of apricot jam sat alongside a half-gallon carton of room temperature milk and a pot of lukewarm coffee. The sad remnants of a fruit platter was laid out at the front, all that was left was half of a very brown banana and a small bunch of overly mushy grapes.

I settled with grabbing a sesame seed bagel and slathering what was left of the jam on it with a plastic bread knife. I would've preferred another flavor of jelly like strawberry or grape, but those were long gone. I sighed as I took a bite of the dry and sweet mix of the fruit preserve-slathered bagel and washed it down with unsweetened milky coffee.

"For such a big tournament, I expected a little more from the catering," I joked to myself out loud.

"It's the end of the day, what do you expect?" retorted one of the attendants walking past. It was Kamila, the same one who'd brought me to the tailor earlier.

"Yeah, that's fair." I shrugged.

"Of course, if you'd gotten here earlier, you could've enjoyed a better selection," she deadpanned back. "But it's not like I can expect you to actually care about this place."

I turned my head and directed an unamused look at her. "I caught five cheaters today and only took a single break. I know this isn't about me being late today, what's your problem with me? This is still just my first day here, so it's not like I've made any bad habits. What did I do to you?"

"Oh please, you know *exactly* what you did. Just strutting in here and

trying to charm your way into a job thinking you're too good to schedule a meeting, believing your supposedly good looks and 'boyish charm' were all you needed to get your way with others."

"What? What the hell are you talking about-"

Before I could finish, I was interrupted by another man interjecting himself into our conversation. He was dressed entirely in gaudy red velvet, from his suit to his pants, to his sneer.

"Eyy love, fancy seeing you here!" said the intruder as he drew his hand towards Kamila's butt.

She quickly slapped it away before it could make contact and delivered a death glare at the offender. "The hell are you doing here, Zane?" she spat, her voice soaked in venom.

"I'm a sponsor! I have as much right to be here as you," he replied with an arrogant smirk. His expression and behavior were just as gaudy as his outfit. "And that's Mr. Fleming to you, love,"

"Not since I quit," replied the attendant, her sour reply providing me all the context I needed.

It was even sour enough to make Zane drop his cheerful facade. "You think you might be safe here Kamila, but nobody runs away from *me*! I'll have you crawling back soon enough." With that final, ominous statement, he turned around and left for the other side of the casino floor.

"Damn," was all I could let out in response as a hoarse whisper. "Is that the guy who owns Zane's casino?"

"Yeah. But don't worry, he makes that same threat every time he doesn't get his way," replied the attendant with a huff. "What a fucking baby."

I nodded drily. "Yeah, total douche. Just like his wife."

Kamila looked at me with a curious expression. "And that's also my problem with *you*."

I just stared back at her with an equally confused look.

“I can’t say you’re just as bad as Zane, but you’re no saint either. Not from how you were acting when you first came in here three days ago.”

I looked down at the ground as the realization hit me. Kamila wasn’t wrong, that was exactly what I did back then, but it was Charisma that made me come off that way. Still, those words and even that partially-formed insult came from *my* lips, so they were *my* responsibility.

“Goldshanks just hired you because of the tournament and how important it is, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to keep you on afterwards. If you ask me, it’s only a matter of time before you try to have your way with one of us, and the moment you do, I’ll make sure you get fired. The girls here are under my protection, and I’m going to make sure they *never* have to deal with another Zane.”

She immediately turned around and began walking away, but stopped when I responded.

“I fucked up. I never meant to act like that when I got here, but that seemed to be the only way to get noticed. I’m sorry.”

Kamila turned around and looked at me with wary, yet searching eyes.

“But we got off on the wrong foot. I promise you I’m nothing like that, and I’m going to prove myself to you. All I ask is a chance.”

She spent several seconds looking deeply into my eyes, and scoffed. “This tournament is your chance, then. Try not to mess it up” She walked away without another word.

Chapter 41: How does this stupid System work?!

[Quick Retcon: Chuck no longer checked out any library books when he went to the bank's union meeting.]

And that was it for the day. I thought there would be more, maybe a meeting with the boss or some kind of status report on my progress, but there was nothing of the sort. After meandering around the lobby for a good ten minutes, one of the bouncers came up to me with an envelope.

"Here's your pay for today, Goldshanks said you did a good job."

I took it with a smile and thanked the man.

"Nah, thank *you*! I've never seen people try to cheat in all these weird ways before. Today was pretty fun. See you tomorrow."

I nodded in agreement, and we both left the casino.

[Level up! (9)]

[Str: +0 | Con: +0 | End: +0 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +2]

[Str: 14 | Con: 18 | End: 15 | Cha: 21 | Atr: 11 | Dex: 13 | Int: 19]

The drive back was thankfully uneventful, and since I was no longer in a rush, I didn't have to floor the accelerator when I passed over speed bumps. But even at a snail's pace, the car still impacted the ground in a thud. It didn't hurt as much, thankfully, but it was still painful. Especially when I passed through a road with several of them in a row.

Thud

"Ow."

Thud

"Ow."

Thud

“Ow! Alright, who the hell put so many of these speed bumps on the road?! One more and I’m going to-”

Thud

My lips curled into a snarl at the last bump, and I seriously considered taking a detour through city hall to find out who exactly was responsible for all of this pain! But before I could slam on the accelerator and hit another inevitable bump, I stopped.

“What the? That last one didn’t hurt.”

I quickly pulled up my shirt and looked at my chest, expecting to see a massive splotch of maroon and purple over it. But to my surprise, the color of my skin was only a little off-beige.

“Could’ve sworn it was going to look a lot worse, almost like…” I grimaced. “Did I just get lucky? Or was it because of something else.”

My eyes flashed. “The System! My Constitution went up by two points a few minutes ago, it’s almost at peak-human levels, or at least way above average. Maybe it started to retroactively apply itself to my body after the level up, so the bruise isn’t as bad now?”

It made the most sense. But I realized that was only because I didn’t actually know much about the System, beyond a couple of fairy tales.

The lull in my suffering and responsibilities, along with the quiet road, gave me the chance to think. I thought I’d be able to take it easy with leveling up after hitting the mob’s finances, at least to the point where I’d only have to worry about my new job, but I was starting to feel like that wasn’t the case.

They were likely to have backup funds, and ways to build themselves back up. Not to mention that even though there weren’t any cameras in the place so they didn’t exactly have my face, they could still somehow *try* to come gunning for revenge in the off chance they figured out who I actually was. Not to mention that man who barged into my apartment that morning…

I let out a massive shiver.

This wasn't over yet. I had a terrible feeling deep down that things were going to get very messy before they got any better, and that I was alone and vulnerable on a dark and dangerous sea where unseen horrors beneath the surface were getting ready to swallow me whole. Here be dragons. And much, much worse.

For all I had the System to light a path to safety, I didn't really know how to point it in the right direction. It was still mostly a mystery since all the information I could find on it came from children's stories. For something so ingrained into this world's entire culture, you'd think there'd be more written on it, right? Even that history textbook mentioned it!

Wait… textbook. Academia…

I floored the pedal, making a beeline towards the library. Once I'd gotten what I was looking for there, I quickly headed back home, thankfully without being accosted either way. The last time I went to the library, things got a little… weird, so I didn't exactly stay to browse. This time was much more calm however, and my time paid off.

"Here we go," I said as I landed on the loveseat in my apartment with a pile of scholarly articles next to me.

The first one on the stack was bound in a thick cardboard, something expected of a traditional hardcover novel. I picked it up and gave it a look.

"History of the System Fairy Tale," I read aloud, turning past the title page and into the table of contents, which was even further split into subsections. The first one just had a list of countries. According to the introductory chapter, each nation had its own collection of myths about the System, but none of them seemed pretty fancy. I was hoping for something like ancient Greece, the Roman empire, or Babylon, but there was nothing like that. Only places you could still find on a map… except for Yugoslavia.

Skimming through the other chapters, all I saw were summaries of

the stories themselves, and nothing that talked about them in-depth. That wasn't what I was looking for right now. Besides, I'd already gotten my fill from the children's section of the Newark library, so I jumped ahead to the second subsection.

The next few chapters were more historically focused. First up was a scholarly attempt to track down where exactly the System fairy tales started out, which after skipping to the end, I could tell they hadn't actually reached any conclusions. All of the available historical records pointed towards the stories just popping up everywhere at the same time about six hundred years ago.

"Really helpful, Dr. Ruxenberry," I scoffed, glancing at the name of the author on the back.

Afterwards was a series of notes on how local culture might have influenced the specifics of each tale, but that didn't really matter much to me either. After skipping further ahead, I finally found a chapter that made me smile.

"Numerical analysis of the System." Back home, knowing the numbers behind the scenes let you make the most of your character when playing a video game, and the System was essentially one big video game. A big mind-controlley one, but a video game nonetheless. I began to read the chapter out loud.

"Observing commonalities between the various retellings of myths, we were able to apply concrete numbers to more obscure aspects of the System beyond what they spell out for us. It is well known that general progress of System wielders is measured through Levels, which go up as the user obtains more worldly experience. However, 'worldly experience' is not merely a metaphor but an explicitly measurable variable."

I raised my eyebrows and stuck my nose between the pages. Level ups always did feel like they came after some major event, but it still always felt a little arbitrary. Maybe some insight would change how I approached situations? I continued reading.

"Experience that leads to an increased Level can be roughly described as (sexual aspect + challenge) * worldly significance. The sexual

aspect refers to how much sexual activity or sex-derived pleasure is created from the event the System user takes part in, and the challenge is how much difficulty they faced in overcoming the challenge. Worldly significance refers to how much of an effect on the world at large their actions or the event had, such that influencing worldwide events or politics would have a much greater weight than, say, securing a small promotion at work. Due to the metaphorical nature of many of these myths, specific values cannot readily be assigned to such events, but the general workings of Level ups are still clear."

I nodded to myself. Actual numbers would've been nice, but there was only so much someone could do with just a couple of 'children' stories, and this was already a lot. I wasn't exactly disposed to doing anything overtly sexual, but it was good to know all of the difficulties I faced made up for it. It didn't look like I'd be doing anything of worldly significance for a long while either, but there had to be some kind of minimum possible value to explain the levels I did have. I continued onto the next paragraph.

"Attributes are another set of numbers tied to Level that have their own bounds for increasing. Every level up, one attribute goes up by a point for every ten levels the System user has, with a minimum of one. For the first ten levels, one attribute will increase, and for levels eleven to twenty, two attributes will increase, and so on. These increases can overlap on the same attribute. Beyond this, attributes can also increase if a particular threshold for use-case is surpassed for that particular attribute. For example, if enough physical activity is performed, the next Level up will give an extra point in Strength to the user beyond the other guaranteed points."

I grumbled to myself. This particular way of handling attributes reminded me of an old game from back home. Its System wasn't exactly popular, since it was easy to accidentally perform too much of an unwanted task or not enough of an important one, and get screwed over on your Level ups. It would be possible to miss out on tons of points if you didn't know this and just tried to get through life, like I was doing.

I didn't think I would be as upset about this as I was, but I just told myself it was because of the unfairness of this System rather than

having missed out on countless bonuses by not hitting the gym or practicing juggling. I mean, why the hell would anyone living in a sexual fantasy world like this bother reading a PhD's research paper? I tried to put the frustration out of my mind while I continued reading.

"Skills, a category independent of Level, follows a similar formula, which can roughly be described as (sexual aspect + action performed) * weight of result. Sexual aspect is the same as with level ups, and 'action performed' roughly indicates how 'powerful' or 'significant' the action performed with the Skill is, while 'weight of result' refers to how strongly others were affected by the application of the Skill."

I squinted as I read that passage again before moving to the next, hoping for a better explanation. Thankfully, that was exactly what I got.

"These variables were very difficult to define, but these are their general definitions. 'Action performed' covers a wide range of qualifiers, but the general idea is that the more powerful the effect of the Skill, the larger this value is. As for 'weight of the result', this variable sounds very similar to worldly significance' but it has some glaring differences. The 'weight of the result' is determined through a different scale that only takes immediate results into account, resulting in less needing to be done for a high number, but less counting towards it.

What makes Skills even more obtuse are their individual eccentricities. Each Skill, depending on how it works or what it does or even completely arbitrarily, will weigh the variables of its experience formula differently. For example, Skills dedicated to preventing sexual gratification would add a bonus to make up for the negative 'sexual aspect' variable, while other Skills that have very little to do with sexuality might choose to only count the weight of the result based on the sexual nature of what it was used for."

I nodded again, taking a long moment to absorb the information. It made sense, and explained a lot of the System's weird behavior. It explained why [Detect Cheating] leveled up consistently when I used it on card sharks as well as relationship cheaters, but also why it was

so difficult to level up early on. The Skill wasn't getting me anything beyond a name and a 'yes' or 'no'. That meant unless I followed up on it with my own investigations, the 'weight of result' would be at a solid zero. But at the same time, even if I just found out the reason but didn't act on it, it would still at least count as something. But what I read brought up an interesting idea I wanted to try out with that particular Skill. What if the sexual aspect *was* positive?

Beyond [Detect Cheating], this behavior also explained [Tinker]… sort of. It didn't level up unless I fixed something that was being used sexually, probably because it wasn't implicitly *or* explicitly a sexual Skill, so the 'weight of result' only registered for sexual use cases.

I let out a sigh as I dropped the book to my lap, my head falling backwards onto the sofa's cushion. The System was fucking bullshit, and I had to live with it. But that just meant I could get around the worst parts of it if I put my mind to it.

Like I was doing right now.

The book had given me enough ammunition to have a go at something called power leveling, aka the only thing that'd give me a chance at getting strong enough to fight back against whatever threats loomed out there.

I got up and headed to the door. It was time to hit the town.

Chapter 42: Letting Off Steam

Situated within a freshly painted building featuring a neon logo of a curled bicep, the gym was well within walking distance from my apartment, and was filled with a large number of men and women. Luckily, there were enough machines for me to have a go at all of them after I registered for a free trial at the front desk. The attendant there, who doubled as a coach, was nice enough to show me the basics of each machine and provide me with a general workout plan.

I'd changed into a wifebeater shirt and baggy pants before coming here, which was probably the best thing I could wear for working up a sweat. Of course, I got strange looks from the other gym goers, who were dressed in gaudy spandex and leg warmers on account of it being 1980. But with the amount of sweat that could flow out of my pores when I was stressed, I was pretty sure a workout would have been enough to leave the colors on any gaudy leotard running.

I spent about half an hour cycling between various exercise machines. The constant repetition, the raising and lowering of an arm here and a leg there, helped me let go of some of my worries. At least the smaller ones, like Goldshanks' tournament.

As for my larger fears, the effort I was putting into my workout let me feel productive, that I was working towards properly getting strong enough to face them. But if that missionary kid barged into the gym right now and came at me…

I froze on the machine, and let the counter-weight push my arms back into the starting position. I sat there for half a minute until a waiting gym goer asked me if I was finished.

I slowly nodded and got up.

If I wanted to actually get strong, I had to push myself. The latest book I read said System users gained extra points in an attribute if they passed some kind of threshold of use, and while I likely missed out on many of these stat boosts for my early levels, I wasn't going to let that happen now.

I approached a metal rod and slowly lifted it into the air in a deadlift. It wasn't that heavy, and it stayed aloft for a good ten seconds before gently placing it down. Well, I started slow, but then inadvertently slammed it onto the ground as I approached the last few inches. A few looks came my way, but they abated when they saw my form hunched over the bar in proper, polite form.

The bar had to have been about fifty pounds. Not enough. I placed a pair of twenty five pound weights on either end and lifted the bar again. This time, it was also easy, not enough of a challenge. How was I supposed to get stronger if I couldn't get a challenge?!

Another pair of weights went on, this time by an additional hundred pounds. I jerked the bar off the ground with the kind of form that would have made anyone with any knowledge of human anatomy wince. Permanent damage be damned, I had 18 Constitution.

"Hey buddy, you might throw out your back if you lift like that," mumbled a man to the side. "You want me to show you how to do it?"

He was big. He had dark brown skin and a buzz cut across his curly hair, and wore an XL-sized t-shirt half covered in sweat stains. Definitely a seasoned veteran of this place, and likely some kind of professional bodybuilder.

I gave him a wild look that made him reflexively take a step back. But seeing that reaction made me soften. "I'm just trying to blow off some steam," I told him honestly.

"There are better ways to do it than fucking up your body," he replied calmly. "Actually, how about a bench press? I can even spot you, if you'd like?"

"You know what? Sure, I appreciate it," I said with a small smile.

As we made our way to the nearest weight rack, I looked to the other side of the gym and saw a similar setup, with its own series of benches and barbells. Just about all of the spots there were occupied by heavy lifters, but amongst the crowd, I thought I saw a mess of curly, black hair.

A throng of gym goers walked in between us before I could get a proper look at whoever it was, but the familiar ‘do made my heart skip a beat.

“Alright, you ready?” asked my gracious spotter.

I nodded and lied down onto the bench as the larger man began to add a series of smaller weights onto either end of the bar that hung above me. I saw a pair of twenty fives to start with.

“I think I’m going to need a bit more than that,” I said with a chuckle.

“This is just so you can practice your form. Now pick it up and slowly lower it to your chest, and then push it back up.”

I shot an annoyed look at the bodybuilder for saying the obvious, but bit my tongue and did as he requested. It was boring, as the bar went down and back up. I looked back at him while my arms still effortlessly held it aloft.

“Fine fine, you’ve made your point,” he said as he reached down to grab a pair of fifties.

Once again, I lifted them without much difficulty, and demanded he push it up to two hundred.

“Damn, have you ever considered lifting competitively?”

“Huh? Not really.” I replied, my attention focused on the bar above me.

“I was just as skinny as you when I started, and you wouldn’t believe how surprised everyone was at my first competition when they saw how much I could lift!”

I grunted in acknowledgement as I began to push the bar back up, and the bodybuilder continued.

“Of course, I only got stronger after that, and by a lot! I’m hoping to go for the deadlift world record in about a month, actually.”

I lifted the bar as high as I could, and the talkative man grabbed and placed it back in its stand.

“Feel better?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, a lot. It’s like I forgot-”

A loud cheer from the other side of the gym erupted at that very moment and cut off my train of thought. Even the bodybuilder who was helping me took several steps towards the crowd forming in the distance to get a better look.

“O-oh damn, I just think someone sniped me from getting the world record…” he said with a tinge of remorse.

I quickly got up and tried to get a look myself, but there were too many taller people blocking my way. By the time enough of the crowd dissipated that I could squeeze myself far enough to see, whoever was lifting all of that weight was gone.

All that was left in their place was the bar loaded with several massive weights, and a single book left on the seat. Its leather cover had a raised feather on it.

“Hey, is the guy still here?” asked the bodybuilder as he came up behind me. He walked over to the bar and began to count the circular plates attached to either side and let out a long whistle. “Fifteen hundred pounds. Are these bars even rated to handle that much?”

I didn’t respond. My pale face was frozen in place, staring at the Book of Ultarian.

“Are you alright? You don’t look so good.”

“I-I think I know the guy.”

“Oh, then you can get his book back to him!”

“I wish I didn’t…”

“I met a guy who walked around with a book like that once, and I remember because you only see those books in churches.”

My head slowly turned to look at him.

“Made a fucking joke out of me when I told him lifting was all I wanted out of life. To get strong. He did something like this, but I thought it was all a dream or something.”

I took an unsteady breath. “Did he have black curly hair, pale skin, and a white button up shirt?”

“Y-yeah, exactly that.” For the first time, his confidence was shaken. “So I guess he was real, after all. Might need another month to break the record now.”

“At least he didn’t throw you through a door this morning. It was a miracle I could even walk afterwards.”

“And you still came here?! You’re fucking crazy, man.”

“This whole world is crazy,” I shrugged.

“You can say that again.” He let out a long, drawn out breath and looked back at me. “I’m Shovon, by the way.”

“Mi-Chuck. I’m Chuck.”

“It’s nice to meet you. You maybe want to work out together again? And… let me know if you see that guy again?”

“Sure, that might be a good idea.”

We exchanged phone numbers and went back to exercising, but we didn’t have it in us to go on for long. In the end, we parted ways and headed out, me to my car and him to wherever.

It wasn’t that late in the day, and there was still a full evening left, but I was out of steam. As much as I wanted to plan out some kind of contingency or way to fight against that missionary asshole, my brain was pretty much fried. I needed to relax.

But at the same time, I still had the urge to grind. I needed to get stronger, and the supposed supernatural showboating that happened here made me realize that I wouldn’t be able to match Strength with

that thing even *if* I brought it up to 20! I needed to raise my other attributes up, maybe I'd be able to weaponize one of them once it was high enough? Charisma was already a powerhouse and beyond what was humanly capable, albeit with some massive drawbacks, but if I got that even higher, maybe I'd be able to use it on the missionary?

Once I was outside, my eyes wandered over to a billboard in the distance advertising a dance club. Eh, I wasn't much of a dancer, but it sounded like the kind of place I'd get to talk to people and maybe even level up my Charisma… safely. Not to mention a nice place to relax after such a stressful day. That settled it then, I was heading to the club, but not before changing into something more appropriate than a sweaty wife beater.

Chapter 43: Going Clubbing

Honestly, what I was wearing was too much. 1980 or not, matching dark blue and dandelion yellow like this should've been a crime. But compared to what everyone else was wearing at "The Metro," I didn't stand out much.

I forced my legs to push me through the door past a nodding bouncer despite the resistance I felt from my much too skinny jeans. 14 strength or not, I felt like I was performing a herculean feat just to move in the overly starched denim.

The venue itself was relatively mellow from the nightclubs I'd known from back home. Rather than blaring lights and deafening EDM, the place was decently lit with white lights, along with a rainbow disco ball at the center of the dance floor, probably a carry over from the previous decade. Synth pop played on the speakers at a bearable volume. Not clamorous enough to prevent casual conversation, but still plenty loud to lose yourself in it. Overall, it was a good place to improve some of my attributes and relax.

My goal was to improve Charisma, especially with how powerful it already was, but why not also look into my other attributes? There happened to be one I neglected all this time, and for a pretty good reason.

Attractiveness. Leveling it up would definitely get more people interested in me, but everyone who has been so far has had less than stellar motives behind it. They actually *were* interested in me, but at the expense of somebody else. Namely an already existing partner.

I really didn't want more of that, but I remembered how the attribute was described in those children's stories I got from the Newark library. Sure, it encompassed physical attractiveness, but it also affected how receptive others would be of my words and presence. It would also work hand-in-hand with Charisma.

And as much as I hated the idea of getting more of *that* kind of attention from people who I had no interest in, I knew I needed every advantage I could get. There were bigger, hungrier fish in this ocean,

and they wanted to tear me in two first. Literally.

I walked over to the edge of the dance floor, where many clusters of men and women talked amongst themselves or swung their bodies in tune to the beat while still being open to starting a conversation if the right man or woman appeared. Mike Smith's face didn't look too bad, and I'd been approached before. Hopefully I'd be the right kind of man for them.

"Hey, I'm Mike," I said to a woman looking out onto the dance floor. He had curly, brown hair in a perm and an average, yet dour-looking face. "You enjoying yourself here?"

"Hm? Yeah, it's pretty fun. Though it could be better, I guess," she replied with a shrug.

"How so?"

"For starters, my… friend keeps trying to hog the dance floor like he owns the damn thing. Doesn't even let me join him because he's apparently a solo act, despite all of the other women he seems to be letting join him. Hey, you seem to be the kind of guy who appreciates a good tango partner, so how about it?"

"Sure, dancing sounds fun!" I replied cheerily.

"No, not that. Wanna meet up later, maybe at your place after closing?"

I raised an eyebrow at her and activated [Detect Cheating]. Of course, it flashed positive and I quickly intuited that her so-called "friend" was in fact her *boy*friend. Honestly, if she wasn't happy with him, she should've just broken up before pursuing me.

"I don't know if I can, I've got a lot I have to do once I leave," I lied. "Maybe some other time?"

"Sure, let me give you my number," she replied, as she pulled out a piece of paper and pen from her small, chic purse and wrote down her digits before handing them over to me.

I sheepishly put it in my pocket and turned away to try again on

someone else.

That was essentially how the next hour went.

“How about it, let’s head back to my place?”

Detect Cheating (lv 11)
Target Jamie Stevenson
Method In secret

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 11 -> 12]

“Hey stud, why don’t we get to know each other better outside?”

Detect Cheating (lv 12)
Target Leslie Brown
Method In secret

“Lookin’ good, my man! How about if I show you around somewhere… more intimate?”

Detect Cheating (lv 12)
Target Jason Young
Method In secret

By the third person who triggered [Detect Cheating], I was starting to feel mentally exhausted. Even the lone guy who hit on me was already in a relationship! Maybe I was just having really bad luck, or was there some underlying quirk in the System that was pointing me towards people who were already taken?

I wouldn’t be surprised by the latter, or at least I wouldn’t be if there was a *reason* it was trying to pair me with people looking to cheat. I took a seat on a barstool by one of the walls and leaned against the countertop. Looking out towards the dance floor, I turned on [Detect Cheating] again, hoping to at least gain some more levels for that Skill if I wasn’t going to be doing the same for my attributes.

“Hey baby, wanna ditch that klutz and get to know a real man?”

…

“You don’t seem pretty happy around him, do you? Maybe I can do a better job?”

…

“Your girlfriend looks like she’s got a weak tongue game. How about if I show you a *real* party in your pants?”

…

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 12 -> 13]

Alright, what the fuck was going on with this place?! Did I accidentally walk into a cheater’s den or something? Was this place secretly a meetup spot for people not happy with their current relationships, where people came to actively cheat on their partners? No matter how horny this world was, it made absolutely *no sense* that there would be *this* much adultery!

Something was up. And as much as I wanted to blame this dance club, or this city, I’d seen it happen too many times for it to be a coincidence.

If people weren’t happy with their relationship, they would break up. That’s how it works.

But the number of people who decided to stay in their relationship and cheat instead was way too high. Everyone couldn’t be *that* stupid… right?

“It’s the world we live in, why are you worrying about it?” a familiar voice whispered behind me.

I froze. It took all of my strength to even move my eyes, while the rest of my head and body stood in place. There was somebody standing behind me, that much was obvious. But all I could see of him was his arm. A skinny, pasty white arm.

“Just go over to one of them and take them home! It’s that simple, why are you so scared? They *want* you, why don’t you give yourself to them? It’ll make a wonderful story.”

A sudden burst of rage had me clenching my fists. It was all I could do, but with a little bit more will power, I forced my mouth to move. “G-go to hell.”

An exhale of breath touched my ear. Along with the sound of his knuckles popping.

Smooth move, Chuck, smooth move. Maybe he *wouldn’t* kill me now? We were in a public place, after all, and others were still able to see him like at the gym. But…

“So be it,” he said with a sneer, and a faint note of finality. “But if that’s not the kind of story you wish to write our lord, then how about you write one with what’s behind you?”

The fear-soaked adrenaline began to grow stale, and as the second wave of the fight-or-flight hormone pumped through my veins, a sudden courage filled my very being. My muscles unlocked and I turned my body in a wide arc with a fist raised, ready to at least push away from the bastard.

But instead, I was met with empty air. But behind him, in the far distance, I saw something worse.

My eyes widened in shock when I saw shelves lined with bottles of all shapes and colors. They followed the bartender as he grabbed a bottle and began pouring its contents into a glass tumbler, the brown liquid bringing about a feeling of nostalgia within me. Somehow, it completely slipped my mind that clubs usually had their own bars. That served alcohol. And I was a recovering alcoholic.

I licked my lips as I forced myself to look away from the sight. With the kind of place I was in, maybe one drink wouldn’t hurt? Dealing with so much stress was doing a number on my mind, and I could’ve really used some assistance to help cope. Maybe something light, even? Just a sip?

I slowly rose out of my seat and walked over to the bar, and eased myself onto a stool. My inner mind was yelling at me to run, to get out of here, anything. The stool looked more like a bear trap, but I still fell onto it. I pivoted my hips and faced the bartender. Before I

could call him over, I was interrupted by a feminine voice.

“You look like you’re trying to make a really hard decision right now. Having trouble figuring out what to order?” asked a young woman. She was about my age, with straight, red hair and freckles, green eyes, and a gaze that commanded my attention. Her body was wrapped in a light-brown sweater and jeans, with a thick, copper bracelet on her left wrist.

“You could say that,” I replied. “Thinking if I should have a drink or not.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard of a decision,” she playfully mused. “What’s holding you back?”

“I’m a recovering alcoholic,” I replied bluntly.

“Then you chose a pretty poor place to spend your night,” she said, equally as blunt.

“Yeah, I kinda just figured that out.” I looked down onto the table and sighed, using my arms to keep me from completely falling to the countertop. “I just wanted to get out and meet new people, and I figured this would be the best place to do that.”

“Yeah, I get it. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll order some soda with you so you’ll at least have some company. I’m trying to keep myself from getting drunk tonight either. It’ll be my treat!”

I looked over to the woman with a cocked eyebrow. Flashing [Detect Cheating] at her, I not so surprisingly got… barely anything? I took a second to turn it on completely and give her a full scan.

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Tarigh MacWard
Method N/A

Well, that was… ironically unexpected.

“So, why aren’t you drinking yourself?” I asked in genuine curiosity after letting the Skill fade to the background.

“Well, I’m feeling pretty down now, and I know booze would actually make me feel any better,” she replied contemplatively. “Otherwise, I’d be drinking all the time! I feel that sometimes, experiencing some level of sadness lets you understand yourself better and let you better deal with it the next time a similar tragedy comes around.”

“Must’ve been one hell of a tragedy, then.”

“Nah, nothing that bad. My boyfriend just cheated on me is all. It sucks, but it was honestly something I should’ve expected. It would’ve been nice if he’d just broken up with me first. I mean, really!”

“Oof, that sucks,” I replied with a wince. “I caught my girlfriend in bed with a total douchebag like two weeks ago, myself. I broke it off with her right then and there.”

“Hold on, douchebag?” she asked with a giggle. “What kind of insult is that? I mean, it sounds fitting for a grade-A piece of shit, but I’ve never heard anyone use the word like *that* before.”

“Oh, sorry,” I replied. That’s right, *douchebag* wouldn’t become a popular insult until like 25 years from now. “That’s pretty much what it means, someone with an overinflated ego who tries too hard to compensate for a shit personality… or a small dick.”

“Well then, to broken relationships!” said the woman with a giggle, lifting one of the two cans of soda that the bartender placed on the counter.

“Yeah, to broken relationships. Cheers!” I pulled the tab on mine, clinked aluminum cylinders with her, and took a long sip. It was definitely Coca-Cola, but it tasted much better than any can I’d ever drunk back home. Oh right, this was still back before they switched using sugar with high fructose corn syrup. Man, I felt bad for everyone when they would switch to New Coke in about 5 years.

“So, what’s your name?” she finally asked after setting down her can.

“Ch-Mike. Mike Smith. And yours?”

“Elsie MacWard,” she replied with a bubbly smile.

“That’s a pretty name! So Elsie, what do you do here in Atlantic City? I just moved here, so I’m still getting my bearings.”

“I don’t actually live in the city, sorry,” she replied apologetically. “I go to the university half an hour away, and I usually only come here to unwind or take my mind off things.”

“Like with the breakup?”

“That’s right. So how about you? What do you do around here?”

“Handyman and security consultant,” I chuckled. “For an apartment and casino respectively.”

“Sounds interesting! Are we talking about security against robbers or cheaters?”

“The latter!” I said with a laugh. “If I see an armed robber, I’m hiding under the nearest poker table until they leave!”

“You’re a smart one, then. It seems like we’re pretty good at attracting cheaters, so I think you’ll do fine.”

“Thanks! And yeah, it really looks like we are,” I replied with a hint of sadness.

“Hey, why so glum all of a sudden?” asked Elsie, leaning forward to get a better look at my dour expression.

“It’s the part about being a magnet for cheaters. I talked to four people here and all of them tried to cheat on their current boyfriends to get with me. It just feels so *weird* to run into so many of them! Is the entire world filled with nothing *but* cheaters?”

“Yeah, I’d agree it’s weird. Why would four women be so desperate to drop whoever they’re currently with for *you*?” She had a little smirk on her lips.

I turned to Elsie with a stupid look. “One of them was a guy, actually.”

“I’m just joking! Sorry to upset you like that.”

“Don’t worry, I was joking too. Not the part about one being a guy, though. I’m just a fan of droll humor.”

“Oh! I’ve never really heard that kind of a joke before, it seems interesting. But yeah, it really does feel like the world is full of them. But I’m sure I’ll keep looking and find someone who doesn’t subscribe to that notion or give into their base desires like our exes did. I know they exist, otherwise society wouldn’t be what it is today, everyone would be too busy fucking each other to get anything done! We just have to find someone that adheres to the Form of fidelity close enough.”

“Haha, you’ve got that right,” I said with a smile and a sigh. “That sounds pretty philosophical, I guess you’re our own resident Plato.”

“I’m actually taking a couple of philosophy classes at school,” she replied with a curious smile. “You seem to know a bit about your ancient greek philosophers yourself, most people only recognize Socrates or Aristotle, and you even recognized his theory I was talking about! I guess you can be Aristotle in that case, Plato’s student.”

“Eh, I always figured myself closer to Diogenes.”

“Wasn’t that the guy who just laid out in the sun all day getting drunk and didn’t take shit from anybody? When Alexander the Great walked up to him and told him he could have *anything* he wanted, he just asked Alexander to step out of *his* sun! I think you give yourself too much credit.”

“Maybe I do!” I laughed. “But unlike Alexander, he was happy. I mean sure, I don’t want to drink or sleep on the streets, but I just want to make a life for myself where I’m content. So that’s why I quit drinking and try to make a decent life for myself.”

“You know, self-improvement is something I can get behind. Everyone has room to improve somehow, and we should always strive for that goal. Good luck in becoming an even better you, though I don’t see *that* much room for improvement.”

I noticed that her gaze left my face and began to go down to my chest

and lower. When she finally met my eyes, I could see a look of desire on her. And for the first time, it was from someone who wasn't already in a relationship, someone who came with no strings attached. It'd been a long time since I'd experienced that kind of action, and even Mike Smith's body seemed to pull me towards her.

Our faces were drawn towards each other and our lips met. One thing led to another and soon we were in my apartment, clothes taken off and doing the deed. We both knew we were essentially each others' rebounds, but I didn't mind. I figured that this was my best bet of getting guilt-free sex for a long time, and I was just happy I wasn't potentially ruining somebody's relationship through the act.

Maybe this world wasn't so bad after all? It looked like I just met the one ray of sunshine responsible for the silver lining.

…

[Level up!]

Chapter 44: Stat Dump

The next day, I awoke in my bed, Elsie already up and putting on her clothes. She'd already put on her underwear and was slipping into her jeans and a necklace featuring a large G between a circle-drawing compass and a perpendicular ruler. Before I could get up or say anything to her, I was met with the following barrage:

[Level Up! (10)]

[Str: +2 | Con: +1 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +2 | Dex: +1 | Int: +0]

[Str: 16 | Con: 19 | End: 16 | Cha: 22 | Atr: 13 | Dex: 14 | Int: 19]

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 3 -> 4]

[Skill Obtained! Seduction (lv 1)]

[Skill Obtained! Lying (lv 1)]

[Sex Point Shop Unlocked!]

[Obtained 1 Sex Point]

Way to go, System. You just killed every last bit of intimacy from that one night stand! I hope you're fucking happy.

I waved away the volume of text from my vision, which ended up getting Elsie's attention. She looked at me with a smile and opened her light pink lips to speak.

"You were just what I needed, you know? Someone nice I could spend my night with."

"Anytime," I replied half-groggily.

"I have to get ready for class, so sorry I can't stick around," she said apologetically. "And let's be honest, we're only each other's rebounds."

I nodded solemnly.

“But you’re probably one of the best men I’ve met in a long time, in that you’re *actually* single and trying to be a better person. I don’t think I’m ready for a fully committed relationship yet, but I think in a few weeks, I’ll have my answer.” She handed me a slip of paper from the table she’d written down on earlier with her phone number.

I accepted the piece of paper, still half dazed, and looked over the digits carefully. Of all of the phone numbers I’d been given since I’d arrived in this world, these were the most important to me so far.

“Hey, Elsie,” I said, looking back up at her face.

“Hmm? What is it, Mike?”

“You made my night last night, and saved me from getting back into drinking. Thanks.”

“You saved my night as well,” she replied with a smile.

“Whether or not we get together, you’re really fun and interesting, and I’d still like to be friends if it doesn’t pan out. You’re probably the first person I’ve met who’s shown me romantic interest and isn’t actively cheating on someone. And that means a lot to me.”

“Sure, just keep up the self-improvement, stay away from the booze, and you’ve got yourself a deal. I’ve left half a pot of coffee for you, by the way. Hope I’ll hear from you soon.” Elsie made her way through the door out of my hotel room. I sighed in contentment as I carefully leaned over to the side and placed the slip of paper safely on the bedside table.

“Wait, *pot* of coffee? I don’t have a coffee maker.”

Apparently, I *did* own a coffee maker. It was just jammed in a closet I never bothered to open. The smell of the rich, dark substance wafted through the air and kicked me out of bed. The clock on the side read 6:50, which was around the normal time I woke up for work, so I took the opportunity to start getting ready.

Wanting as much time to review all of the System changes as

possible, I made sure my trip to the bathroom was as quick as possible. I scrambled to brush my teeth until it felt ‘good enough’, and rinsed off my face instead of taking a shower. I’d taken one yesterday evening after coming back from the gym anyway, so I knew I wouldn’t smell that bad.

After getting out of there with my work clothes, I grabbed myself a cup of coffee from the pot Elsie left me and sat down on the small dining room table. Taking a sip of the strong brew, I called up the System.

Name Chuck Bachman (Mike Smith)
Attribute Strength Constitution Endurance Charisma Attractiveness Dexterity Intelligence	Description Your physical strength, ability to hit harder and lift more. How much physical damage you can endure, be it from injuries or disease. Your physical Endurance. Also applies to your refractory period. Your ability to convince others with your words, both spoken and written. Your physical attractiveness, how receptive others are to your presence and words. Works in tandem with charisma when in person. Your physical dexterity. Applies to movement speed, fine motor skills, and how finely you can pleasure someone. Your ability to recall previously learned or observed information, and how quickly new information can be learned.
Skill Detect Cheating

machine or device from functioning properly.

Threat Awareness The ability to detect minute details in the surrounding area.

Seduction Influence others to feel attraction towards you. Stacks with all other charisma-based Skills.

Lying Improves how much others believe in your lies.

Hold on, why did I gain all of these new Skills in the first place? Lying and seduction… shit, did I do something *bad* with Elsie? Was she not fully into me or did I lie to her to get her to come back with me? My heart began to race until the caffeine finally entered my system and brought me back to the land of clear thinking. I took a deep breath and considered everything that had happened.

Seduction could've just been because I actually got *someone* to come home with me, just being myself was enough in that case. Or more likely, it could've been the smalltalk I was making with those other ladies to grind my Charisma and Attractiveness. I guess I might've been checking them out while I was doing it. And lying? Did I say any lies yesterday? I guess to get away from the people who I wasn't interested in, but do white lies and deflections really warrant me getting a brand new Skill? I've lied plenty of times before yesterday.

And it wasn't like I gave someone a fake backstory to elicit pity from them, or lied about my qualifications on a job interview. Or it could be that I told Elsie that I broke up with *my* girlfriend, when in reality it was more like *Mike Smith's* girlfriend. Maybe it was like Tinker, and I only got the level because I used it in a sexual scenario. But did I say any *bad* lies that hurt anyone?

I shrugged to myself. I couldn't remember anything severe I did last night, which was honestly not a problem because I wasn't blackout drunk like I'd normally be after a night out. I smiled to myself as I remembered Elsie stopping me from ordering a drink.

Man, I'd love to get to know her better… wait, what if [Seduction] would interfere with that? I wanted her to like me for who *I* was, not some dumb Skill! After quickly fidgeting with whatever mental connection I had with the System, I was able to turn it off, along with [Lying]. Phew.

I took another gulp of my coffee and grimaced at the strong flavor. I

probably should've added some milk and sugar earlier, but I didn't want to bother clearing the System display only to bring it back up again after. I mean sure, it just took a thought or two, but I had to leave for work soon, and every second counted here.

On another note, it looked like my efforts to grind Attractiveness were a success! Flirting with a bunch of women did in fact raise the attribute! But now I was possibly heading into a committed relationship, so there went my chance to grind it even more. Unless romancing her would be enough to increase it? Another shrug, another gulp, and another shudder.

There was the issue of what I was going to start grinding next? Charisma's just past 20, and at that point I'd might as well be… whoever the charismatic equivalent of Albert Einstein was. I dunno, Bernie Madoff maybe? Or one of those televangelists who ripped off old people? But with the life I'd been living so far, that would probably go up on its own without me putting any extra effort into it.

Intelligence sounded nice, I could check out Atlantic City's library and start reading or something. Or maybe more Strength? I had the bodybuilder's number from yesterday, Shovon. Maybe I could give him a call later to see when he'd be at the gym?

But there was also Constitution to consider. It'd help me take hits and it even helped me recover from that nasty bruise I got yesterday from…

Suddenly the taste of the coffee turned much too bitter in my mouth.

What the hell was I doing, thinking about using these powers so casually when there was a monster following me around. I gripped the thick paper cup hard enough that it began to tear at places, splashing my fingers with the cooling brew. How could I be so casual when my life was on the line?!

A series of soft chirps and tweets from outside my apartment brought me back to the real world. What was I doing? I was *living* my life. Doing what I wanted to do since I came to this world.

The frustration and shame I was feeling cleared up like a nose after

inhaling a blast of steam, and I took a slow, deep breath. I was living my life. So what if there was some kind of beast at the gates, threatening to eat me? If I rolled over and begged for my life, let it control me through fear, then that would be no worse than the kind of life I lived back home.

I was a slave to my addiction back then, but I wasn't going to be a slave to fear here! I was going to *live*!

But I still had to do something about that missionary, and before that, I had to get to work.

So with my head held high, I stepped outside to greet the day. First would be fixing up whatever else broke thanks to Ultarian Festival week, and after that was to hit the casino for day two of the tournament. After that, well… I'd start making preparations. And besides, I might have had an ally in the matter. I'd have to call him up for more than just working out.

As I made my way towards Hiroi's office, a rogue thought popped up in my head.

"Oh yeah, what was that last notification I got? Something about a Sex Point Shop?"

[Opening Point Shop]

…

"What the fuck?!"

Chapter 45: Tournament Day 2

“What the fuck’s a Sex Point Shop?” I whispered to myself as the menu popped up in front of me.

Points Available:	
Haunts Available:	increase points and expand the shop!
Ability	Description
Heat Seeker	Finds the closest willing sexual partner and sends them your way.
Second Chance	Reverts someone’s opinion of you to what it was at the beginning of the current conversation. Reverts a maximum of 15 minutes.
Gold Digger Magnet	Boldly attracts attention towards you based on how much money you have. Displays of wealth have an even greater effect.

Was this supposed to be a thing? None of the stories or that scholarly article said anything about a point shop. It honestly wasn’t a surprise this was the first time I saw it, since I hadn’t actually had sex even once until last night. One of the abilities in it looked pretty interesting, and incredibly useful, but…

I couldn’t afford it.

And I could get more points by having more sex? Well I wasn’t going to sleep around town for more points, and Elsie and I weren’t entirely together yet. So…

I threw my arms up into the air. “This point shop is useless!”

I got a few odd looks from the other residents who were already up this early, but once they saw it was me, they went back to their business. I was really making a name for myself here, wasn’t I?

I continued on towards Hiroi’s office, and got on with my day.

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 7 -> 8]

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 8 -> 9]

[Tinker Perk Obtained! Understand Mechanism]

Skill	Description

Tinker Level 3 Mechanic
Understand the workings of a mechanism

I didn't get as many level ups in Tinker as I did yesterday, but I was making a whole lot of progress. Not to mention the new perk! What I had to go through to get it though, I'd prefer *not* to mention. At least it made up for the inaccessible Point Shop.

After finishing up at the apartments, I handed the owner's manuals back to Hiroi and headed to the casino.

"Mike, you're early today!" exclaimed Mr. Goldshanks as he greeted me inside. He was flanked on either side by the two women from the day before, who each gave me a friendly wave.

"Yeah, I didn't run into the same… problem I did yesterday, so I got here as soon as I could. Wanted to show you I was taking this seriously!"

"That's good, that's good. Did the two bouncers at the door give you any trouble? I've told them along with Todd from security to be extra careful today, and now I'm telling you too."

"Them? Nah, they recognized me from yesterday, and my badge didn't hurt. But one of them even asked me to sniff my hand first to make sure I was actually me!"

"Your hand?" asked my boss, confused.

"The perfume lady from yesterday, daddy. Don't you remember?" asked the woman on the left, nudging my boss' shoulder.

"Oh right! How could I forget?" Mr. Goldshanks slapped his head with a massive hand and let out a chuckle. "Well as of now, I want you to expect a lot worse. The people here today have a lot more to lose than yesterday's wannabe pros, and the resources to do a better job."

"Understood boss, I'll be keeping my good eye on them today."

"And which one is that?" asked the woman on the right.

I simply pointed towards my forehead with a wide smile.

The three of them laughed in response.

“I’ll leave you to it then, Mike. Good luck.” The trio turned around and headed towards the back, probably to Mr. Goldshanks’ office.

I continued forwards and walked past several people, mostly the casino’s staff and several volunteers sent by my boss’ competitors. I nodded at Kamila who returned the expression but coated with an icy glaze. I accepted her continued apprehension with a warm, yet wary smile, and continued onwards to my true destination.

After a good night’s sleep, I could see how she was right about my behavior when I first showed up here. Barging in, flexing my Charisma, and just expecting to get my way. It made me consider being careful *how* I used System, I didn’t want to fall into the trap of expecting it to do *everything* for me.

And their reaction showed me that the System didn’t so much as carefully bend people around me, but rather conspicuously shove my will down their throat. Whether that was a good or bad thing, I was still deciding. At least I knew that as long as I didn’t make use of it, the way people around me acted was how they truly were. I was grateful that every aspect of the System had an off switch.

Speaking of which, if I *did* use the System to get something out of someone that they normally wouldn’t give, would that be coercion? Hypnotism? But then what about using *natural* charisma to get what I wanted? It was probably the “normally wouldn’t” part that I had to be careful of. Just don’t be a dick about it, then. Really the best policy anyone could follow.

After mentally drafting my doctorate thesis on the philosophy of using magic, I finally reached my true destination. Yesterday, only a half-eaten, lackluster platter was present for me to scrounge through for my breakfast. Today was different. Much different. Now that the preliminaries were over and the only people left were the true competitors, the catering was upgraded to a dramatic level of grandioseness.

Before me lay a massive charcuterie board made up of various pieces of bread, toast, and bagels with a collection of various cheeses, fruits, and nuts. Cheddar, brie, and gorgonzola sat in the center-left, with strawberries, grapes, and blackberries placed in a decorative circle around them. Honey-roasted almonds, pistachios, and brazil nuts made up the top right corner. And finally, some smoked salmon and bacon rounded out the board with some red and orange.

Ignoring the rest of the less visually impressive options, I began to quickly pile a slice of toast with various meats and cheeses, with a handful of fruits and nuts to the side of my plate. Before I could take a bite, however, I noticed that some of the cheeses smelled off. Not only that, but several of the strawberries and the bread had mold growing on them.

With a look of disgust and disappointment, I tossed out the contents of my plate and shuffled back to the table to pick out a cheese danish and another cup of coffee. I mean, what good was such an impressive spread if most of it wasn't even edible?! The flakiness of the fresh pastry and surprisingly mild notes of the caffeinated drink did well to raise my spirits, at least.

It didn't take too long for me to finish, and by that time the tournament began to start up again. I saw the same announcer from the day before Jerry whatshisface, and that Zane asshole who tried harassing Kamila. The former was standing in front of a camera, combing his fingers through his hair, while the latter simply stood to the side with the other audience members.

Speaking of the audience, they were way larger today as well. Something on the order of three times as many people as yesterday. As a result of their presence, several red, velvet ropes were erected between them and the players, with plenty of space in between.

They were probably interested in seeing the more qualified competitors of the *actual* tournament, thus didn't bother showing up for the preliminaries. I didn't blame them, there was a reason I never went to high school football games back home when I could just watch the pros on TV.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to day two of the World Poker

Series Invitationals! I'm your host, Jerry Chetman, and we are live from Atlantic City! Today will be a battle between the winners of yesterday's preliminaries and the real pros! Haha."

The camerawoman waved her hand in a circle, urging him to get on with it.

"So without further ado, let's get started!"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting myself relax while turning on my Skill. With a sharp exhale, I opened my eyes and honed my focus on today's competitors.

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Lewis Bell
Method N/A

Clean.

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Gabby Rogers
Method Mirrors at work

Wrong type of cheating.

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Quinn Cummings
Method Counterfeit Chips in pocket

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating lv 13 -> 14]

Well hello, there! I walked over to one of the casino's bouncers and let him know about the cheater. He quickly made his way to the man in question and requested he empty his pockets. To my astonishment, they were empty!

"What are you doing?!" shouted Quinn. "I was *invited* here! Is this how you treat your players?! Who the hell would want to come to a place like this if this is the kind of welcome I get!"

I looked at the man intently. [Detect Cheating] had never been wrong like this before. Maybe it was a false positive and he just had bad

enough luck to accidentally trigger it? For something as magical as the System? I didn't believe that, there was more to this. That was when I noticed his left pants pocket had an extra flap of cloth partially stitched onto it.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 4 -> 5]

I walked over to another bouncer and asked him to tell the other man to tug at the fabric of his right pocket. He made his way over in a moment and relayed my request. At first, they were worried about doing such a thing, but after seeing the sheer look of terror on the accused's face, they sprung into action.

After a particularly dexterous grab and yank, the similar square of fabric came loose from his pocket and several chips fell out onto the floor. Exact replicas of the ones the casino was using. Without further deliberation from the bouncers, the man was forcefully ejected from the venue and I sighed in relief.

The first cheater of the day apparently taught me the valuable lesson that my Skills had their limitations, and at the level I was apparently fighting at, I'd probably be facing up against many more of them soon. And maybe [Situational Awareness] was what I need to even the playing field? Or just my own wits?

Chapter 46: I ain't gotta explain sh*t!

Day 2 of Goldshanks' tournament continued as it had started. Everything was bigger and harder than yesterday, from its competitors and their abilities, to the audience, and even the catering. And most importantly for me… yeah, it was the catering.

But more importantly for my boss, it was the balls on these cheaters. I'd already caught one who was hiding counterfeit chips in their pocket under a fake flap of fabric, but just barely. And I knew that this was only the start.

"Alright, let's play some more wack-a-cheat, then," I whispered to myself as I activated [Detect Cheating] and honed it in on the competitors.

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Thomas Jones
Method Nervous during business trips

Not what I needed.

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Shiv
Method N/A

Clean. If this was going to become a pattern, then I could expect the next person to be…

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Jaylin Fischer
Method Communication

Guilty!

I looked at the man in question, Jaylin Fischer, and saw that he was wearing what Mike Smith's memories informed me was a hearing aid. It consisted of a bulky box hanging on his torso with a set of ear plugs coming out of them, which was apparently exactly what

hearing aids from the 1980s looked like. Of course, I could tell they weren't what was advertised on the cover.

Tinker (lv 7): Diagnose Problem
Device Radio Transmitter
Issue Underpowered

That made things complicated. He probably had the device cleared by event security before the tournament so any attempts at asking him to remove it would be met with a lot of trouble, and not just from the cheater. I doubted Mr. Goldshanks wanted to attract the ire of whatever disability association would be up his ass for asking Jaylin to remove his "hearing aid."

Hold on, if his gear was a radio receiver, then I could solve the problem by finding who was feeding the info to him! I grinned. It was just like my interview, and with how my Skills had leveled up since then, this would be a piece of cake.

My eyes suddenly went wide as a wave of knowledge exploded into my consciousness. It took the form of bits and pieces, little scraps of information that added up to a mostly whole sum. It was nothing like an entire textbook's worth of knowledge, thankfully, as something like that would've had me screaming in pain on the floor.

But instead, I was able to make out the basics of how a short-range radio transmitter worked, and one fact got my attention in particular. The source had to be nearby, and heavily powered. Once again, nothing extreme, but it at least needed a briefcase-sized battery or to be plugged into the wall.

So, whoever was supplying this cheater information had to be in a position to actually see everyone's cards and relay the info across, just like last time I encountered a radio transmitter. But unlike last time, I could discount whoever was in the security room. Alright, so it had to be someone in the room with me, and they needed to have electricity.

I started by looking towards the audience. Everyone stood still, their hands either at their sides or in their pockets. Could one of them have been using a transmitter to send over morse code? [Situational

Awareness] didn't think so, as I saw no twitching in their arms from continuously mashing a button. More so, I didn't see anything that resembled a battery, or any wires leading to a power outlet. No power meant they were clean, then.

So if it wasn't them, maybe it was someone who had a *really* good view of the cards? The only other people left were the pair of news crews. Jerry Chetman's group and another single videographer. The lone man stood partially crouched over a fancy tripod-mounted camera with a headset and mic over his ears, entirely focused on his task. If it weren't for the press pass around his neck and the logo of the local "New Jersey News" station on his shirt, I would've considered him the prime suspect.

I sighed in frustration as I continued scanning the room, intent on not being outdone. My eyes went across the casino floor for the possibility of finding additional cameras that weren't there before, hoping [Situational Awareness] would help me suss them out. Eventually, my weary eyes settled on the large poster on one of the far off walls that advertised the event.

It was pretty, something colorful and static that was much easier to stare at rather than the throng of people below. The poster held the logo of Goldshanks' casino right underneath the name of the tournament printed in large letters. Further below those were the names of the sponsors. None of which were doing much anything to make *my* job easier, the greedy bastards. I could recognize various casinos, a card manufacturer, the National Poker Network TV channel that Jerry belonged to, Jersey Connect News, and… wait, Jersey *Connect* News?

I quickly turned back to the lone videographer and looked at his shirt again. New Jersey News. Why the hell was someone from a news station that didn't sponsor the event here when the *actual* sponsor wasn't? I focused my Skills at the man and revealed the truth.

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Jamal Baxter
Method Reading card information

And there we go! Now that the Skill was activate and focused on the

man, I could make out a series of slight lip movements from him. He was no doubt relaying the competitions' hands via the headset's microphone, and using the camera to zoom in and get a better view.

I nudged one of the bouncers and filled him in. He looked at me with surprise at the familiarity of such a setup, but nodded and called another compatriot to head over to both the cheater and his accomplice.

I watched with pride as one bouncer ripped the headset off of the videographer and shouted into the microphone, making the cheater at the table recoil in pain as an audible static ringing reverberated through the room. Everyone froze, including the bigwigs in the audience. Goldshanks himself, who was watching from his own little corner, finally let out a bellowing guffaw, easing tension in the room. The bouncers laughed alongside him as they forcefully ejected the cheaters.

And there went my hardest challenger so far.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 5 -> 6]

And it looked like I wasn't the only one who thought so too! With what was definitely the biggest challenge I'd face for the day out of the way, I walked on over to the catering table to grab myself another cup of coffee and a danish. It was well past noon at this point, and we wouldn't break for lunch until the current round was over. Besides, I deserved this.

As I munched on the pastry and sipped at my lukewarm brew, I decided to let [Situational Awareness] idly run, not wanting to take the extra effort to focus [Detect Cheating] after I'd already swept through the room so thoroughly.

And yet, something about the Skill slowly pulled my attention towards the stands.

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target McMahon
Method

What was up with that name? Were those underscores actually part of it?

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Jones **Method** N/A
Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Choi **Method** N/A

And to my surprise, none of that random sampling had any cheaters! That was probably the first time something like that had happened! But something about them grabbed the Skill's attention, and even if it wasn't because they were cheating, I knew it had to be something.

I looked into their eyes and saw a mix of boredom, entertainment, and tension. As well as how they were all looking in the same direction. My eyes followed them to the tables, and something there immediately caught my attention.

One of the players, a young man, was utterly dominating the game and wasn't afraid of boasting it in their displays of bravado. Well, I knew what that meant…

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target Mazzocco **Method** Magic

Hold on, was I reading that right? Magic? Maybe it was just sleight of hand and the System decided to be fancy about it. I honed in on him using the remaining power of [Detect Cheating] along with [Situational Awareness] to see if any of that was going on, but to my perplexion, I couldn't find anything to suggest that. No cards up his sleeves, nothing in his pockets, not even any signs of secret compartments!

What my Skills did point out to me, however, was the bracelet the cheater was wearing. It was a solid weave made out of thick copper strands, with a large sapphire embedded into it that almost looked like it was glowing. As the next round of cards were dealt, I could've sworn that it really did for a second.

Ok, maybe that bracelet of his really *was* magical? I mean, I had the System myself so it wasn't too far-fetched of an idea. Too bad none of the bouncers would ever consider the same. If I was going to get rid of this guy or his source of "magic", I had to do it discreetly.

And by sheer providence, the half-time bathroom break started! The magic man, Scout, made his way into the bathroom, and I followed at a distance. And I wasn't stalking him, because all of that coffee I'd drunk was starting to get to me. As I entered the men's room, I saw the cheater making his way into a toilet stall and hearing him lock the door. On the sink, hanging around the faucet, was exactly what I was looking for. The magic bracelet.

It couldn't be *this* easy, could it? I put the bracelet into my dress pants pocket, making sure that my suit covered the small bulge, and walked out of the bathroom with the look of someone who'd taken a very refreshing dump.

Yup, it really *was* that easy.

Taking my place again, I waited for everyone to get back. Apparently, Scout took quite a while finishing up in the bathroom and returned looking quite flustered. Who knew why? As his game started back up, his previous winning streak was dead in the water, and it wasn't long before he lost and was booted from the game.

It honestly didn't feel as satisfying as seeing him being thrown out by the bouncers, but I still took pleasure in seeing someone who threatened my workplace take such a brutal loss.

[Skill Level Up! Revenge 5 -> 6]

Chapter 47: See me in my Office

The current round of games finally came to a close, and with them, day two of the tournament. The various competitors got out of their seats, shook hands, and made their way out of the casino.

I myself took the chance to finally close my eyes and stretch. The ways people were cheating today was nothing short of sheer insanity. The counterfeit chips in a fake pocket was sensible enough, but the fake cameraman with a radio transmitter and the *actual* magic? It sent my brain into overdrive. I was a hawk, and didn't let anyone on the floor out of my sight.

Of course, none of the cheaters I'd caught after that were anything like those two, and were in fact disappointingly boring. And they were only disappointing because I'd put in everything I had just to catch them. Small fry like them honestly weren't worth it.

But when the competitors began to walk away, my eyes locked on the only cheater still here who *was* worth it.

Scout Mazzocco, a man dressed in what I could only describe as "too much". Even my starched skinny jeans from yesterday were nothing compared to the high-waisted yellow zoot suit the man had on that looked like they were straight out of an old cartoon. Seriously, he looked like he was a walking banana or something, all that was missing from the getup was some green face paint.

I didn't even notice it earlier because my attention was all on the fact that he was cheating at cards using *actual* magic, and I couldn't blame myself for that.

My eyes focused on the out of place man as he, unlike the other competitors, made his way to the viewing stands. Just like all the other losers of this round of the tournament, his shoulders were slack and his face hung in a pout. His feet dragged him forwards in a slow shuffle that almost made me feel bad for catching him. Almost.

Three of the viewers made their way down and greeted him, the ones who were staring at him during the competition. The only reason I

remembered who they were was because [Detect Cheating] didn't find *any* dirt on them.

Their conversation started off with a series of pats on his back, trying to cheer him up. And then one of them looked at his hand and frowned. While Scout had partially cheered up, the reaction had made him shift to a defensive posture. He said something I couldn't hear and the entire group broke out into a series of harsh whispers.

I only smiled to myself smugly and tapped my pocket. They were probably upset about him "losing" his magic bracelet.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness 6 -> 7]

[Situational Awareness Perk Obtained! Lip Reading]

"Why the hell did you take it off in a public place? It's pretty much jewelry, of course someone's going to steal it!" shouted one of the viewers, his name was Artyom.

"I wasn't about to get shit all over the battery! I don't care if the holding material is also brown so nobody would notice, I'm not about that risk!"

"That- that isn't even a risk," said Lucius with a tired expression. "Why would you even think that?"

"Come on, Ash, back me up here," pleaded Scout to the third member of the group.

"No way, man," they shook their head. "Even *I* don't take mine off when I'm in the field."

"But this *isn't* the field! It's a poker tournament! We're on vacation!"

"You're an idiot sometimes, you know that?" asked Artyom. "Well our vacation is over now, so let's just head back. And we'd better find that battery before we actually get going."

Scout slumped and followed the others towards the exit.

I was curious now. Scout wasn't acting alone, and these others also

knew about magic, calling the bracelet a battery. On top of that, despite him cheating and the others having full knowledge of it, they were considered innocent by [Detect Cheating]. As in, completely innocent, they weren't even cheating on their partner or anything! Finding a group like that was rare, and I slowly began to turn towards them to follow. But I only made it halfway towards the door before I was interrupted.

"Oh, Mike! There you are!" exclaimed a deep voice.

I turned around to see my current boss, Damian Goldshanks, approaching me with a woman on either side of him. He was dressed in a rich, white suit while the ladies wore red and blue pastel dresses each.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Goldshanks," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"Come see me in my office."

I froze, and the breath I took was stuck. I quickly nodded and followed the heavy-set man into the back. When we were finally behind closed doors and sitting on opposite facing couches, Goldshanks began to speak.

"Oh, don't worry, Mr. Smith," he said candidly. Him using my last name wasn't exactly reassuring, however. "This is just the orientation I was going to give you yesterday morning. I have no complaints about the work you've done for me. Well, except for your tardiness, but you said it won't be a problem going forward?"

I finally let the air out again in a sharp exhale. "I'm glad to hear it, sir. And yes, this won't be a problem tomorrow. Sorry again."

"The fault isn't entirely yours." My boss let out a short chuckle. "Bringing you on board was a whirlwind for everyone, especially with such little notice." He settled down and leaned forward, his eyes bore into my soul. "But let's get back to business."

I slowly nodded.

"I'd like to formally introduce to you my daughters, Amira and Alina."

The two women sitting either side of him gave me a cheerful wave.

I began to wave back, but stopped partway through. Wait, daughters? These two who were always on his shoulders? I thought they were his sugar babies or something, but that meant…

I took all of my willpower not to show any of my disgust.

His daughters looked confused at my sudden jerk, but Damian continued. “I made this casino as a place that would be safe for these two. A place that would keep everyone who worked inside its walls safe from the kind of world that lurks just outside. A world obsessed with sex, that expects you to be just as interested no matter how much you aren’t.”

Whatever nauseatingly lurid thoughts that were going through my head suddenly stopped. I leaned over and looked at my boss with confusion, then curiosity.

“I’ve never had any interest in it myself.” Mr. Goldshanks waved a lazy hand. “I never even got a girlfriend, or a boyfriend for that matter! And because of that, I was bullied mercilessly. And I don’t just mean through school, what a laugh that would be if some teenage punk made me the man I am today, but no. It continued into college, and even the workforce.”

“The test you gave me when I first came here…” My voice trailed off as I remembered how my boss offered me one of his daughters as an assistant. “It wasn’t just to see if I was a spy.”

“Well, it started out that way. But your speech at the end, how you poured your heart out about what you went through to find a job and your convictions; it moved me! I realized that you’re one of us! Many of the people who work for me were forced to have sex as part of their jobs, and they came to me because they wanted reprieve from ‘societal expectations’.”

He made a spitting motion, but nothing left his lips. He looked back at me, and there was now something dark.

“But even I’ve been known to make mistakes about people. If I have

any reason to believe you're trying to bring into my casino what I've worked so hard to keep out, I'll make sure you never work in this city again."

I nodded back hurriedly, trying not to wipe away the bead of sweat forming on my brow.

"But if you've got a good head on your shoulders, Mike, then it shouldn't be a problem!" Goldshanks gave me a friendly grin, completely at odds with how he looked a second before. "Just use your common sense and treat others how you want to be treated."

I nodded again, my eyes turned to the ground, exhausted from the sudden flux of fear to relief. But that wasn't how I wanted to respond to Mr. Goldshanks, my boss. That wasn't how I wanted to respond to a kindred soul. I steeled my confidence and looked up at him with one final nod. "That was always the plan, sir."

Chapter 48: Seeking Answers in Faith

By the time I'd finished my meeting with Mr. Goldshanks, the quartet of strangers I wanted to follow had already left, and were long gone. I briskly walked outside and looked around, seeing that all of the tournament participants had left.

Go figure.

After letting out a sigh, I began walking towards my car. I walked down the sidewalk to the corner of the building where the road turned into the parking lot. The flat asphalt field was about half as large as the casino itself, with plenty of spaces for every kind of vehicle. Cars, motorcycles, even limousines! The tournament had brought in enough people that there were barely any spaces available by the time I got there this morning, even the reserved staff parking spots were usually almost completely full.

Just as I was about to turn into the parking lot, a semi-truck flew past me, hitting the curb and rolling over the strip of sidewalk I was about to step onto. It hit the stop sign, sending the metallic octagon and metal rod it was attached to flying several feet forwards.

No horn, no signal. The truck was maybe an inch away from my face. Looking at the deadly mass move past me brought forth a terrible memory, one that flashed and quickly disappeared as my head turned to see what absolute moron was driving the screaming metal death trap.

Curly, black hair. Pasty white skin. A button up shirt and a colorful striped tie.

The missionary sneered at me as he turned the corner without slowing down and continued down the street without lifting his pedal from the accelerator.

Da dum.

Da dum.

Da dum.

Breathe! I screamed internally as I forced air into my lungs and slowly exhaled it. It took me doing this several times before I could think again, and when I finally returned back to reality, I wished I didn't have to.

Me being alive was a miracle. Wasting this gift was the last thing I wanted to do.

My hands tightened into a pair of fists I slammed onto my thighs.

I had to get back to grinding, I had to get stronger, I had to kill this son of a bitch. I had to do all of this before that maniac actually killed me!

So was it time to hit the gym again? I could call Shovon, and he'd make sure I was getting the most out of my workouts, or at least that I was putting as much as I could into each one so that the System gives more points the next time I leveled up. Which would be…

"Dammit!" I shouted out loud as I turned into the parking lot and began walking towards my car.

When was I even going to get my next level up for my workouts to actually take effect? And even when I did, how much stronger would I become? I already had sixteen points in Strength. It would take at least two more level ups before I could get to twenty, and that was only if I maximized the grind *just right*. Too bad that wouldn't be enough.

Don't get me wrong, twenty points put me at peak human capabilities. I'd likely break plenty of world records without breaking a sweat! But that wouldn't stop that inhuman monster from ripping my head off.

I shook my head as I got into my car, gripping the steering wheel hard enough to leave an indent on the leather.

Hold on, attributes weren't the only weapon I had. Sure, there were Skills too, but those were almost all non-combat related save for [Revenge] and maybe [Tinker] if I could build myself a weapon. Too

bad those two were too low leveled to actually be of any use in a real fight, let alone against that *thing*.

No, I meant the Point Shop. There were only three things listed on there, and two of them were sex related, but I was sure that if I grinded it out to be able to see more of it, there would be something specifically made for fights. Something that could put the missionary *down*.

My mind wandered to Elsie. I had her phone number written down and tucked safely away at my apartment. I could head back, give her a call, and start building up more points. She was the only person in this world I felt comfortable doing it with.

It would be so simple, I'd finally be safe…

The smile of relief that was forming on my face quickly froze in place. I turned the rear view mirror to face me and looked into it, into my eyes.

"What am I doing?" I whispered to myself as my mouth began to curl into a look of disgust. "She's a person, not a means to an end!"

The self loathing I felt at that moment was overwhelming. The only thing that saved me from it was a grand realization.

"That's been his plan all along, hasn't it?" I whispered to myself. Struck by a sudden inspiration, I turned on my car and began to drive it out of the parking lot and out onto the main road.

That missionary, he could've killed me already if he wanted to. He already exacted his punishment for insulting Ultarian the first time I met him, and all he'd been doing since then was taunt me. Taunt me that I wasn't strong enough, taunt me into drinking again, into getting laid. Sure, he failed that second one, but was that actually his goal? No, it was something else.

He was challenging me. As if he *wanted* me to grow stronger so I could stand up to him. There was no way any normal human being *could* get strong enough to face him, but a System user? He worshiped Ultarian, he definitely knew about the System fairy tale.

Did he know I was a System user too?

Abso-fucking-lutely.

But what would me getting deeper into the System do for him?

Memories of how Charisma turned me into a negging asshole came to mind.

“Yeah, that would do it,” I mumbled to myself as I made a right turn and pulled into a small parking lot.

He wanted me to get deeper into the System, deeper into the mental quagmire, and have me lose myself to it.

I hated that idea, and the realization alone made me ready to swear off the System for good.

But… I wasn’t an idiot.

It hurt to admit it, but I needed that god forsaken power source, at least to get through Goldshanks’ tournament. Let alone to not instantly die to a light slap from that missionary.

So I’d keep using it, but I wouldn’t lose myself to its negative mental effects. Strength seemed to be immune from them, as far as I could tell, so I could at least keep grinding that safely.

But as for actually killing that son of a bitch? Well, I hadn’t tried searching for his weakness yet, but I had a good idea of where to start.

I parked my car and slowly got out, before turning towards the church building and making my way to the front door.

“Why hello there, son,” said a robed man from inside. He was facing towards the massive sculpture of a quill in the back, but slowly began to turn around. “Service isn’t until later this week, but I’m sure I can-”

“Hello, father, I’ve come to repent my sins.” A single crocodile tear streaked down my left eye as Charisma fed me my lines.

The man froze in place. He looked at my face, drunk in my words, and shed a tear himself. Hook, line, and sinker. “I- Ultarian has truly blessed you by showing you the light. Please, please come in!” He briskly made his way to the front and ushered me inside to one of the pews.

We took a seat next to each other as he pulled out a copy of his holy book and placed his hand upon it.

“So tell me, my child. What made you realize the truth of our lord?”

“Well, I met one of your exemplar missionaries who helped convince me,” I replied. “I didn’t get his name, but he had curly, black hair and a really colorful tie.”

“Missionaries? I’m not sure I follow…”

“The man going around in the white button up shirt? Spreading the good word door to door to bring others into Ultarian’s gentle embrace?” I looked into the priest’s eyes, and frowned when I saw that he genuinely looked confused.

“There… is no need for such a role, at least not these days, as the whole world collectively worships Ultarian.”

Even with the beyond-human levels of glib provided by Charisma, my face still strained at being confronted with a dead end.

The priest noticed, and quickly backtracked. “Although the role you describe sounds very familiar to me, I believe I’ve heard of it.” He patted the book on his lap.

My eyebrows rose, and he took that as a signal to continue.

“Some of my favorite recollections within the scripture are a very old myth, about Ultarian’s greatest servants. The Fatewatchers. Long ago, in the earliest days of our faith, the Fatewatchers were tasked by Ultarian himself to spread his influence throughout the world.”

I nodded along, listening intently.

“The cults were far greater in number and power back then, but the

Fatewatchers proved more powerful. They were the heralds of Ultarian's will *and* words, truly the most blessed of his creations. Using great strength and guile, they carried wings, haloes, and the holy book to defeat the cults and bring their ranks into our own. I could write down where to find their tales in the scripture."

The old man held such a genuine smile, that it made me start to feel guilty about my own false one. But that feeling was undercut by a much stronger one.

Fear.

"That would be wonderful, father," I replied. *Du Dun.* "From the bottom of my heart, thank you." *Du dun.*

The old man took out a loose piece of paper and began to write onto it with a pen.

DU DUN.

I had no reason to be this scared from just a story, especially when I'd already experienced the real deal up close and personal. But I knew what that missionary, this Fatewatcher, was.

It was an angel.

And so help me, I was going to kill it.

Chapter 49: How to Kill an Angel

Ring ring ring

The phone began to ring as soon as I stepped into my apartment.

I threw off my shoes without bothering to put them inside the closet as I rushed over to answer.

“Hey, Chuck!” came a staticky, yet familiarly excited voice from the other side. “It’s Shovon, do you want to work out?”

“Oh hey, Shovon!” I said back, but without the same level of enthusiasm. I’d just gotten back and I wanted to relax a bit first. “Um…”

“I don’t blame you if you feel like you need another day to recover, but I’m headed there right now so I wanted to at least give you a heads up.”

I held the receiver away from my mouth and grumbled, but I had to admit, the man’s excitement was infectious. And besides…

“That doesn’t sound like a no,” he began.

“You know what? Sure! I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Great, see you there!”

I hung up the phone, changed into my workout clothes, and headed out.

It took me about as long as I said it would to drive over to the gym. Since it was only a bit past three in the afternoon, the building was relatively empty with the regulars likely working their normal nine to five jobs. Apparently neither Shovon nor I were exactly normal, evident from him bench pressing a five-hundred pound dumbbell as easily as I could lift a small puppy.

“Hey Chuck! What’ve you got there?”

“Something for you to lift between sets,” I said as I tossed a book onto his massive chest.

His eyes widened as he put the barbell back on its stand and leaned up. “The fuck is this? Did that missionary get to you, or something?”

“Open it up to the bookmark and start reading,” I casually replied.

Shovon glared at me, but did as I asked anyway and slowly picked up the book with the quill indentation, turning the pages to the section in question. “Genesis of the Fatewatcher,” he read aloud. His previous squint disappeared as his eyes looked like they were about to pop out of his sockets.

“I had a hunch and asked about our ‘mutual acquaintance’ at the church.”

“Well, it paid off.” Shovon turned the book around so I could see the illustration. It featured a faded drawing of a young man with familiar curly black hair. “So now what do we do?”

“We know he’s not human,” I said slowly. “So let’s start by figuring out what exactly he is, and look for a weakness.”

The body builder looked at me with a strange expression before finally nodding and grabbing the barbell again. “Why don’t you start, then?” he asked between grunts. “I’ll follow your lead with the next story.”

“Sure.” I headed to the front desk and got myself a notepad and pen, before heading back to the weights. I took a seat and opened the book to the first story.

“Birth of the Fatewatcher,” it began. “In the times of yore, before the Lord of Words cradled the whole world in his loving embrace, the cults ruled the hearts and minds of people of the world. These terrible groups were split, yet held full sway over everyone. As all-powerful Ultarian is, in order to speed up the spread of the holy word, He created the Fatewatchers. These beings were molded into the most beautiful and powerful in all of existence.”

I began to doze off after reading the first paragraph before catching

myself. With a quick shake of my head and a gulp of water, I dove back into the story, this time skimming through the fluff.

“The first push of the Fatewatchers took place in the frigid North, where colors washed over the sky like the waves; a sight of beauty that Ultarian greatly adored. But their task was not easy. The Vikings stood against them, and they put up a terrible fight, though not one that was unconquerable. In their biggest battle in those early days, the third of the Fatewatchers faced off against one dozen Berzerkers. Through the powers of their own false gods and magic, they transformed into half-man, half-bear creatures, yet larger, stronger, and more skilled than either parts. Despite their strength to carry one hundred and fifty stones, they were no match for the Fatewatcher. Besides, the Lord of Word’s creation could carry much more!”

I did the math in my head. A stone was about fourteen pounds, so a hundred and fifty of that was… over one ton.

Gulp

“Alright, that’s definitely something about them. I don’t know how lifting strength translates to combat strength, but it’s definitely worth something.”

I took the paper and drew a line that split it down the middle, labeling each new column “Strengths” and “Weaknesses” each. Under the first column, I wrote “1 ton+ lift strength” and “Killed 12 werebears.”

I lifted the pen up and regarded that last part for a second. How much of this story was actually real? Sure, the System was a thing and the Fatewatcher was too… likely. But werebears? Magic? I hadn’t seen anything of the sort in this world, could I really trust stories from a holy book to be accurate?

My hand fell to my pocket, and it felt at the bracelet inside. The System seemed to believe magic was real, from what it told me, so maybe there was some merit to the tale after all?

I continued reading, but it wasn’t long before the tale ended without much fanfare. The next one started immediately after, but before I

could get through more than the first sentence, I was interrupted by a hand falling on my shoulder.

“Alright, let’s switch,” said Shovon, wiping away the seat on his brow.

“Sure,” I replied, handing over the book to him along with a towel.

He grabbed both with a smile and sat down as I made my own way to the dumbbell.

I began to do deadlifts again, this time following the form Shovon told me to. Elbows tucked in, feet planted firmly, shoulders not too hunched.

I looked over to my gym partner to see if he had anything to say, but he was looking at my notes with a frown, and not one of concentration. He cocked an eyebrow and looked over to me, mouth half open. I was sure he was about to ask me something, but he instead kept quiet, gave me a thumbs up, and got to reading.

The set went by relatively quickly. Despite the lack of a level up between then and now, it didn’t feel as difficult as it did yesterday. Maybe it was the fact that I had a better form this time, or likely it was because I wasn’t under as much stress. When I finished, I put the barbell back on the rack and headed over to Shovon.

I frowned as I looked over his addition to the notes. He’d made a third column, splitting weaknesses into two and labeling it as “Personality.” Under it, he’d written “Extremely devoted to Ultarian,” and “Prideful.”

“So I’m guessing what you read was more of a fluff piece on them?” I asked.

“Kind of,” he replied with a shrug. “It’s about a Fatewatcher debating different religious leaders.”

“Debates, huh? The one I met didn’t seem all that interested in talking.” I rubbed at my chest, feeling the remnants of the feather quill indent on my skin.

“That’s why I didn’t write ‘eloquent’ as a strength.” The body builder shook his head. “The so-called debates were just strawman arguments a ten year old could take down, like the Fatewatcher’s opponents drank stupid juice that morning or something.”

I let out a tired sigh. “Maybe these really *are* just parables, then? Not actually things that happened but are there to teach a lesson to whatever kid is made to read it?”

“I dunno about that, there are some details that match up with things I’ve read from a few history books about other cultures,” Shovon replied with a hopeful smile. “Namely, about their way of life, the food they ate, and how their royal courts did business.”

“Wow, you sure know a lot,” I said with raised eyebrows.

“Thanks! I used to study anthropology, so I recognized some things here.”

I considered asking him if he knew about the System then, since most cultures around the world had stories about it. He could’ve helped me get even stronger if he knew about it. But in the end, I decided not to, otherwise he might’ve thought I was either crazy or working with the Fatewatcher.

“Gotta love how they included all of the extraneous details in these stories,” he continued. “Though they overdid it with the part the Fatewatcher got hurt by their holy weapons. Where they got hit, how much they bled, how long it put them out of commission. Way too gory.”

My eyes went wide and lips curled into a snarl. “What did you say?” I asked in a low whisper.

“That it’s way too gory, like, just talk about what kind of *person* these Fatewatchers are!”

“Why the ***fuck*** would you be interested in that?” The curse word in the middle of my sentence came out as a shout as I lost control of my voice. I breathed in heavily as I glared at the bodybuilder seated in front of me.

“Woah man, what’s the problem?”

“The *problem* is that you’re messing around here!” I shouted, not caring about the few gym goers giving me stares. “You just described an actual, solid weakness of that bastard and you just skipped past it! What gives?”

Shovon’s eyes went wide in realization. He took a second to look into my eyes, and I could’ve sworn he flinched back when he saw the fire in them. But he quickly regained his composure and slowly replied in a soft whisper. “Are you thinking about… killing him?”

The pause gave me a moment to settle down, even if only a little, and quiet myself back down to an indoor voice. It still didn’t erase the sheer rage in what I said. “Are you not?”

“N-no! Why would I want to kill someone? I’m not a murderer!” His look quickly turned fearful. “Are you?”

Something about his gaze broke through all of my anger, all of my rage, and cut deep inside me. My own expression began to soften, and took on a look of fear. Not for our stalker. For myself. “No, I’m not.”

“Then why do you want to kill him?”

“Because he’s trying to kill *me*,” I said back in a shaky voice that began to break. “And I don’t want to die.”

“Wait, what?” Shovon sat up and looked at me in surprise.

“He’s trying to kill me, Shovon.” I took a deep breath as I fought back the raw feeling in my throat. “He broke into my place yesterday and punched me so hard, I went flying through a door, ripped it straight off its hinges, and left me with enough damage that probably would’ve killed me if I wasn’t lucky. And just a few hours ago, he tried to run me over with a truck!”

“Oh my God,” Shovon disbelievingly whispered to himself while placing a hand to his head. “Again…”

“Huh?” I weakly asked.

“He never did anything like that to me, just dislocated my arm after I said I didn’t want Ultarian’s help in getting strong. I was able to push it back in and get back to working out the next day.”

“That would get a lot of people running to the emergency room, how are you *not* trying to fight back?”

“Your injury sounded like something that would’ve put someone in the hospital too, I could ask you why you’re *not* trying to use diplomacy,” he shot back. But the cockiness in his voice fell as he finished his sentence. “But the truck was sheer attempted murder.”

“Yeah.” I took a seat next to him on the bench. “I’m just trying to defend myself.”

“Hey,” he laid a hand on my shoulder and flashed me a smile. “Maybe you should leave the violence as a last-resort? I don’t think either of us has what it takes to do any *actual* damage to him. Not without some kind of holy magic.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” I placed my hand against the magical bracelet in my pocket. “But in the meantime, I guess it wouldn’t hurt doing it your way either.”

“That’s the spirit!” exclaimed Shovon as he sat up and handed me the book. “But you say that like we’ve got a chance of actually finding something like that!”

“Who knows?” I asked back with my own smile. “I’ve had crazier things happen to me.”

Chapter 50: Tournament Day 3

The rest of my workout-information gathering session with Shovon thankfully went uneventfully. No wait, it *regretfully* went that way. While I didn't have to open up more to him, our research hit a bit of a dead end. We got plenty more strengths written down about the Fatewatcher, such as super speed and durability, but almost nothing in terms of weaknesses beyond the impossible.

Holy weapons. Mjolnir broke a couple of bones, but their own fists were able to overpower the wielder. Zeus' lightning bolt actually vaporized one of them, but Ultarian did something weird that apparently cut off Mount Olympus from the rest of reality or something else insane. All things I recognized from religions back home, but were reduced to nothing more than long-gone myths here. Well, they were pretty much myths back home too, but people still told them back there! They were declared outright *dead* by Ultarian's holy book, he'd taken over. He won.

So we tried to follow Shovon's plan of finding ways to convince that asshole to leave us alone. And of course, there wasn't much. We figured the Fatewatcher was impatient, quick to temper, and prone to violence over talking things out beyond throwing around a few taunts. The only thing we had going for ourselves was that their love for Ultarian was apparently so strong, they would do anything he told them, or would act to defend his honor. Maybe with enough Intelligence and Charisma, I *might* be able to come up with something clever enough to convince that bastard to fuck off, but that was a really big maybe.

So in the meantime, I settled for the closest thing to a holy weapon I could get my hands on.

"Alright, just fill out this form and you'll soon be the proud owner of your own Beretta 686 Vittoria!" exclaimed the salesman at the sports store I stopped by. "So, your wife plans on hunting birds with this baby?"

"Well, of a sort," I replied with a smile, flexing Charisma. I had no idea why the damned attribute told the shopkeeper that the gun was

for my wife, but he seemed to be agreeable to it, so I went along with it. “And you said I could get this now?”

“No no, it’ll have to be tomorrow afternoon. As much as I’d love to hand it to you now so you can take it to your wife, I still have to get the paperwork filed or else I’ll get into some serious trouble. I’m already cutting corners as it is, so this is the best I can do. Just make sure your wife comes by tomorrow to pick it up.”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, beginning to catch on to what Charisma was doing. “Tomorrow, then.” After work.

I spent the rest of the evening watching TV and eating dinner, before falling asleep early.

The next day went as expected, I finished up my work as a handyman before heading over to Goldshanks’ casino for my real job.

[Skill Level Up! Tinker (lv 8)]

[Skill Level Up! Tinker (lv 9)]

I walked into the casino an hour before the tournament would begin, earlier than yesterday thanks to [Tinker] continuously leveling up, and was met with a loud screaming I didn’t expect from the nearly empty building.

“What are you *doing?!* Your off schedule! You’re supposed to patrol this area for ten seconds *exactly*, not fifteen!” shouted Todd, the casino’s head of security.

“Woah, sorry boss,” replied a bouncer with his hands placatingly raised in front of him. He looked oddly demurred, despite being almost half as tall as Todd. “But it’s only five seconds, it shouldn’t make a difference.”

“It’ll put you out of sync with the others, and that leaves openings for cheaters! There are already so many, way more than there should be! You can’t be taking any more risks, numbskull!”

“Alright, I’m sorry boss,” the bouncer responded. “I’ll be more precise.”

“Good, I don’t like having to babysit you all. Now what are you waiting for? Get moving!”

The bouncer ran off while occasionally looking at his watch to make sure he was on schedule.

I slowly walked over to Todd with a questioning look. “Damn, don’t you think you were a little harsh?”

“Huh? Oh Mike, I didn’t see you there,” replied the head of security as he turned to face me. “Sorry, it’s just stress. I probably shouldn’t be taking it out on the others like that.”

“I won’t lie, there are a lot more cheaters than I expected either.”

“But you’ve been covering for the rest of us pretty well, so thanks. This is the least we can do to help out.”

I nodded and turned around to walk away, but I stopped halfway and looked back at Todd. “Hey, just curious, but what’s your story? I talked to Goldshanks yesterday and he told me about why everyone who does works here.”

“Huh? Oh yeah, that.” He scratched the back of his head and looked to the side before continuing. “I was pretty much at the bottom rung at the last place I worked at, always getting bullied and shit by everyone there. They made me do some pretty humiliating things, so I don’t like to think about it much, but they pretty much treated me like dirt.”

“Li-” I stopped myself from finishing that sentence. *Like you’re doing now?* It wouldn’t be good to say that to the face of the man who’s supposed to be making my job easier. “Like, that’s pretty bad,” I said instead. “I’m sure the bouncers might be feeling the same way about how you were treating them earlier.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right about that. I’ll try to take it easy, thanks Mike.” He slowly walked away to the back of the casino, likely to the security room.

I just took a deep breath and made my way to the catering table. The selection was similar to yesterday’s, but the quality of everything

looked much better. I successfully assembled myself a breakfast sandwich with the unspoiled ingredients and took a bite. It was delicious. And worth the effort to, as plenty of the common items on the tray were still pretty bad. Moldy fruit and slimy, near-putrid chicken were pretty easy to avoid though, so I wasn't complaining when what I was able to make out of it was still so good.

I followed my sandwich up with a small, overly-saccharine pastry and a cup of milky coffee to jolt me even more awake, and made my way to my position. The hour since I got here passed pretty quickly, and the tournament soon started.

The cheaters went down relatively quickly. They mostly used the same methods as the others I'd caught in the previous days, so figuring out these new ones wasn't anything worth writing home about. But eventually, my Skills pulled me over to a seemingly normal table, and I just *knew* something was going on there.

The competitors looked relatively benign, each of them staring at the dealer as she handed out the cards, scratching at her ponytail partway through. Apparently she had an itch or something, because she did it again during the next round as well.

And the one after that.

Yeah…

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Yates
Method Ink

And to find who she was helping.

Nope, nope, not him, not her, so that left…

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Phill
Method Dealer

This was honestly starting to feel kind of easy! The videographer gave me the biggest challenge so far, and these two were definitely in

the same tier, but I figured it out in no time flat. I guessed that it was the higher Skill levels and synergy between them that let me do this. In fact, it was [Situational Awareness] that was pointing me towards Hank's eyewear, which gave me the last piece of the puzzle.

With a quick tap on their shoulders and a few polite words, Goldshanks' bouncers made their way to the table in question.

"Excuse me sir, could I please see those glasses?" asked the formally dressed gorilla to the cheater in question.

The bouncer inevitably wrenched them from the player's face when he refused, and the hulking man even let out a chuckle when he placed them in front of his own eyes.

"Would you look at that, it really *is* invisible ink! You'd think this was some kind of spy movie or something!"

"Maybe my optometrist got my order mixed up?" replied a nervous Hank. "If you have a phone, I could give them a call."

"No need, they're right here!" replied the bouncer as he turned to the dealer. "I love what you've done with your hair! But I've never heard of anyone dying it with invisible ink before. Come on you two, you're both out."

"Dammit Hank, you said we wouldn't get caught!"

"I'm sorry, honey! They said it'd be the perfect plan!"

"Now who told you that?" asked the bouncer.

"Uh… my psychic?" replied Hank with an awkward smile.

"I see. Is your psychic *also* sitting at the table?"

The bouncer frowned when he saw me shake my head. And the gorilla of a man showed only greater displeasure when the two cheaters got up of their own accord and made the walk of shame to the exit unassisted.

The rest of the round went by uneventfully, at least for me. I heard

Jerry whatshisname give some colorful commentary on some sort of obscure poker mechanic that was made use of by one of the competitors, but nothing that I cared about or really understood anyway.

Eventually, everyone had finished and started packing up. The staff collected the cards and chips, the camera crew their gear, and the losers their broken egos.

As I was about to make my own egress, I was stopped by a deep voice behind me.

“Mike, great job today!” exclaimed my boss with a hearty chuckle. By his side were the same two women who usually accompanied him, his daughters, who gave me a pair of bright smiles.

“Thanks!” I replied with a cheerful look of my own. “Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, why do you let all of the cheaters just leave? Shouldn’t you call the police or something?”

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Goldshanks. “There’s a squad car waiting outside to pick them up. But at this rate, they should switch it out for a bus!”

“Huh, I never saw them,” I shrugged. “I guess they leave before I do.”

“And get here after too,” said my boss with a nod before changing the subject. “So, quite a number of bizarre cheaters so far, huh?”

“That’s right sir, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Good, that’s good!” As he finished his laugh, his eyes began to narrow and voice grew to a tense whisper. “But don’t you think that it’s been *too* weird? That there are too many cheaters around?”

“Every day.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking that too. I’m hosting an emergency meeting for all of my staff now. Come over to the security room in the back.”

I nodded and followed my boss to my second ever office meeting.

Chapter 51: Emergency Meeting; Someone's Hella Sus!

I sat in a sparsely padded foldable chair, staring at the black and white CRT monitors lining the far wall of the security room. Around me was the rest of the casino staff; the dealers, attendants, and bouncers, all in their own more comfortable seats.

"Sorry Mike," apologized my boss as he stood facing us by the door. "I haven't had a chance to get a new chair for you since you just joined us earlier this week."

"Don't worry about it," I replied with a shrug. "I haven't had much of a chance to sit down during the tournament, so I didn't notice."

"And that's why I've called you all here," he said with a sigh. "In all of the other tournaments I've hosted or sponsored, there's never been *this* much cheating. Maybe several minor attempts spread across an entire week, but there've been more cheaters in these past three days than I've seen during entire season-long events!"

Just then, the door was thrown open by a man with a twisted fashion sense. His angry grin perfectly matched his red suit and the clunky jewelry that hung from his fingers and neck.

"What the hell are you doing here, Zane?" asked Kamila with a sneer. The attendant wasn't alone with the look on her face, everyone else in the room glared at the newcomer with similar disdain.

"I already told you love, I'm a sponsor!" he shot back with a predatory grin. "And that makes me privy to whatever's going on in the tournament. So are you going to invite me in, Goldshanks?"

"Zane," said my boss. "Get out."

"What? You can't do that to me! I have a right to know whatever you're planning here!"

"This meeting concerns affairs regarding *my* casino, not yours," continued Goldshanks. "So Daniels, would you please escort Zane here to the door?"

“Door? I’m already standing here!”

“The *front* door. Nobody likes a smartass, Zane.”

A burly man rose from his seat and walked over to the intruder, forcing him out with a hand delicately placed on his shoulder.

“God, I need to sit down,” sighed my boss as he closed the door and locked it behind him. He let out a frustrated groan when he realized there weren’t any open chairs available.

“Here, you can have my seat Mr. Goldshanks, sir!” exclaimed Todd as he jumped out of his own plush operator chair.

The boss took his seat without a word before continuing. “First things first, I wanted to congratulate Mike here for catching so many cheaters today. I probably should’ve started with that.”

I blushed slightly as my coworkers clapped. Sure, it was the kind of unenthusiastic clap you’d get from a peer passed over for a promotion, but it was still a show of appreciation. But I noticed that Todd, Kamila, and another two female attendants she sat close to weren’t clapping as excitedly as the others. I couldn’t really blame them.

“You did a great job, but honestly, you shouldn’t have to.”

That got him several confused looks, including one from me.

“The cheaters today were incredibly innovative, and were working with much better resources than anyone in their position would.”

“Isn’t there supposed to be a record-sized prize pool for the tournament, sir?” asked Todd. “Maybe it’s drawing all of the cheaters out of the woodwork, and they think it’s worth spending the extra cash to win?”

“No, there’s more to it,” replied Goldshanks. “There shouldn’t be this many among the pros, who are players first and cheaters second. If anything, I believe that this is an act of sabotage. Someone on the inside is organizing these cheaters together to ruin this tournament.”

Everyone stared wide-eyed at the boss, a mix of confusion and concern on their faces. Kamila and several others, of course, looked at me.

“Hold on,” I replied. “The invisible ink duo said that they were following someone else’s orders. Any idea who it could be?”

“I don’t know, but I have a suspicion. With how many cheaters that have gotten through the front door with their equipment, it has to be someone on the inside.”

This time, even more of my coworkers turned to face me. It was doing *wonders* for my self-confidence.

“No, not Mike!” exclaimed Goldshanks. “I’m talking about one of the sponsors! The dealer with the ink was vetted by somebody, and the fake videographer somehow got his hands on a press pass. The only people who have the ability to make that happen *and* the motivation to ruin me are the other casino managers!”

Everyone nodded at the revelation, drawing their baleful gazes away from me. I nodded along with them, more intrigued by my boss’ own analytical abilities than his declaration. My focus had entirely been on catching whoever popped up in front of me, not trying to search for a bigger picture, so I wasn’t beating myself up for that. Honestly, I was just impressed by my boss being able to figure something like this out, where all of my Skills failed.

But even though I didn’t feel too bad, I still felt… weak. My Skills really *weren’t* enough in the grand scheme of things. Just like how money couldn’t buy class, Skills couldn’t buy *actual* skills, and I wasn’t going to shy away from the chance to cultivate those either. I’d need to if I wanted to fight the Fatewatcher.

“So of course, we have a short list of suspects,” continued my boss. “Starting with-”

“Zane,” Kamila and I said at the same time. We looked at each other in surprise, before she turned away in a huff.

“Yes… he’s probably the most likely out of them, but there are two

others whose involvement we can't entirely discount." He let out a drawn out sigh. "Victoria Palmer of Victoria's Garden and Kozakov Petrovich of The Bear's Den. Probably not as outwardly bad as Zane, but that's only because they understand the meaning of subtle."

"So what are we going to do about them, boss?" asked Todd. "Should I fish around the security community to see if any of them are up to something? I could try to pull some strings with my connections to-"

"No, you keep working to stop them at the entrance. Mike! You're in charge of this investigation."

I flinched when the boss shouted my name. What did he want *me* for? It wasn't like *I* had any 'connections' or anything as impressive as what the security manager was laying down.

"This will be something you're going to have to do after-hours, since you'll still need to stop any cheaters who get past Todd."

Another nod from me, and another glare from Todd.

"I'll be doubling your current pay for the rest of the tournament contingent on results, since I expect another 4 hours a day from you. No overtime, mind you, but that's only because you'll be working a total of 8 hours a day at this rate."

"Sounds good to me!" I replied, offering no resistance to the lack of additional overtime pay. I was already making a ton and now having my salary doubled, probably making me the luckiest guy in the room, judging by all of the jealous looks I was getting. Couldn't say I could blame them.

"Of course, the challenge will be to find proof of their involvement if we want to hit them back hard. We won't be able to hold it over them without some kind of leverage."

"To give to the police?" I asked.

"With the kind of money and power they have, the proof would be better used as blackmail. The risk of embarrassment from it coming out would do more harm in the court of public opinion than a criminal one. Besides, they'd have someone seduce the prosecution or

the jury to their cause. But they can't seduce all of America!"

The rest of the room let out a series of polite short chuckles.

"Wait, really? Is that a thing?" I asked. "Can you really seduce your way out of trouble?"

Once more, I received a round of stares, but at this point I was starting to get used to it.

"I mean, if you have the looks, money, or power," helpfully replied Todd. "Either seduce them yourself, or hire a lawyer to do it for you."

"So does anyone actually go to prison then?" I asked. "Except poor and ugly people, of course."

"Do you live under a rock or something?" retorted Kamila. "Only the worst kinds of people get sent there like child predators and murderers! Zane would just get a big fine and his name plastered over the news, in the best case."

"That is *if* Zane's the one behind this," replied Goldshanks. "But finding out is all up to you, Mike. Can I count on you?"

"Sure thing, boss. I'll start investigating and let you know as soon as I have something."

"Good," he said, fishing out a cigar and a lighter. "In that case, meeting adjourned. See you all tomorrow."

Everyone nodded and filtered out of the cramped security room, including Todd. I was the second to last to leave, and the man standing before me placed a massive yet gentle hand on my shoulder before I could make my exit.

"Hey Mike," said Mr. Goldshanks in between a puff.

"What's up?" I turned around and asked.

"The reason I'm asking you is because you've been pulling a lot of, well, what I can only describe as miracles, this week. So you might have the best bet of figuring it out."

“Oh, well thanks!” I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment for the second time today. “But why not pick someone like Todd? He’s got way more experience, connections, and-”

“He doesn’t have connections,” Mr. Goldshanks interrupted. “He’s just trying to suck up to me by sounding like some kind of hotshot. I can’t say I don’t appreciate his enthusiasm, but I’d rather he focus that energy on his job. I judge my employees by their character and results.”

“Alright then,” I nodded. “I’ll get to it now.”

“And one more thing.” My boss looked me in the eyes with a hint of concern. “Don’t stress yourself too hard. I’m asking you to find a needle in a haystack in half a week when a specialized investigative team would take a year to do the same. I don’t *actually* expect results, and any kind of evidence is more than enough to make me happy and earn you your extra pay. You’re best utilized here, keeping the cheaters who show up from actually winning the tournament.”

“Alright, I’ll take things easy then.”

“Excellent, have a nice afternoon, Mike.” Mr. Goldshanks patted me on the shoulder and left the office.

As I made my way back to my car, I knew exactly where to begin. Time to head to the police station and meet with the invisible ink idiots who probably hated my guts.

Chapter 52: Jailhouse Coq

It was my first time doing "overtime", and for probably the first time in my life, I planned to make my boss proud. He believed that there was some kind of organized force directing the large number of cheaters we'd been facing at the tournament, so it was my job to find the culprit.

"So which one of you three could it be?" I mumbled to myself as I drove down the highway. "Zane, Petrovich, or Victoria?"

Mr. Goldshanks had already narrowed my search to the three major casino owners in the area sponsoring the event, due to their power and motivations against him. Now it was my job to find out which one of them it was, and to collect proof of their wrongdoings. Figuring out whodunnit would hopefully be as simple as using [Detect Cheating] on each one when they showed up to the tournament tomorrow, but the real challenge was proving their guilt. And that was why I was here.

I exited my car and made my way to the local police department. The building was a lot smaller than I expected, especially with it being Atlantic City and all. Maybe this place wasn't as big of a shithole as it was in my time yet? Or maybe it had something to do with what Kamila said about how only the worst kinds of people actually went to prison? Not wanting to bother about the logistics of crime and time travel when I already had enough on my plate, I went inside.

"Atlantic City Police Department, how can I help ya?" asked a bored officer who sounded like she was a competitive chain smoker outside of work.

"Hi, I'm Mike. I work for Mr. Goldshanks, from the casino hosting the tournament?" I said, flashing my work badge. "I wanted to talk to some of the cheaters we caught today, see how they got away with it for so long."

She leered at me for several seconds before motioning me over to a clipboard. "Sign your name here and head inside. Most of them are being kept together in a holding cell, but we're interviewin' a couple

of ‘em right now to figuh out just that, so there’s no real reason for you tah be here.”

“Thank you, but I’m getting paid to be here, so I’m going to give it a go anyway,” I replied, writing down my actual name of Chuck. Call it a hunch, or even just plain old fashioned paranoia, but I had the sudden feeling in the back of my mind that I didn’t want to leave a paper trail here.

The officer silently shrugged in response to what I’d written before returning to her magazine. It looked like there was a porno rag expertly hidden underneath a fashion one. I returned her gesture and made my way to the interrogation rooms.

The tiled floor on the way there was incredibly dusty, with each step I took leaving a very visible footprint. It didn’t make sense for there to be this much buildup, even over years, without it ever being cleaned up. Maybe a vacuum cleaner exploded a bit ago, and nobody’s gotten around to cleaning it up yet? But rather than track down a janitor, I just continued towards the interrogation rooms.

There was only a small selection of them, all lined up next to each other on the other side of the building, with one-way glass windows and thick metal doors. As I reached interrogation room A, I was met with a younger female officer exiting.

“You want to talk to the cheater too?” she asked, eyeing me suspiciously. She had curly blonde hair and an unusual amount of cleavage showing for an authority figure.

“That’s right,” I replied, pointing to my badge.

“Sure, have fun. But the man’s a… *hard nut* to crack,” panted the officer, seemingly out of breath.

I rolled my eyes and continued forward, but a sudden realization hit me. I’d been here long enough to know what she was implying, and the idea of an authority figure wielding their power like that sent a small shiver running down my spine. I tried not to show it, and instead just went inside and shut the door behind me.

The interrogation room consisted of white painted concrete, with a single lamp, table, and chair in its center. The lamp shined down onto a seated man with disheveled hair who was in the process of buttoning up his shirt. I recognized him, he was part of the invisible ink duo, with him as a player and his girlfriend as the dealer who marked the cards.

“Hank. Hank Phil?” I said, reading off the [Detect Cheating] popup while slowly making my way to the table. I tried playing up the role of a hardboiled interrogator, with a gruff voice, menacing presence, and everything I’d seen in the old detective shows my parents back home used to watch. I could’ve turned on Charisma and made this a cakewalk, but after seeing what my boss could do on his own without any kind of System inspired me to try and do the same. Besides, I could’ve used the practice to actually get good at intimidation on my own merits.

“Who the hell are you? You don’t look like the police,” he said. “Hold on, you’re the one who put me here! What the hell do you want?!”

“Oh, it’s pretty simple,” I casually replied before jerking my head towards him with the wicked glare of an angry chihuahua. “I want to know who your boss is.”

“Well, too bad. I’m pretty comfortable here, so I don’t think I’m going to spill.”

“Really? Underneath this hot lamp and surrounded by nothing but white?” I asked, tapping the light source to make it start swinging. As I did, its bulb immediately went out.

“Believe me, it’s not even the hottest thing around here,” the cheater replied with a smirk.

I only doubled down on the force of my gaze, channeling my inner constipation to bring forth a truly fearful presence. And that bastard somehow didn’t even flinch! Time to try something different. “How badly do you think you’ve fucked up?”

“Eh, it’s not so bad,” Hank replied with a shrug.

“Don’t forget the fact that you’re going to be banned from just about every casino in the city, if not the entire country, for the stunt you pulled on *live TV*. Perhaps I could pull some strings and reverse the decision if you gave me a name?”

“Really? That’s all I’d need to give?” he asked hopefully. “In that case, sure! The person who told me how to do all this is Lady Quirova.”

“Lady Quirova? What kind of name is that?”

“That’s the name of my fortune teller!” laughed the cheater, almost falling out of his seat as he kicked at the air.

“Are you telling me you *don’t* care about being put on the gambling world’s collective shit list? You’re never getting into a casino again after today unless you get my help, and then how are you going to earn yourself a paycheck?!”

“Oh please, poker’s just a hobby, and not even a big one. Do you think I actually do this for a living? I already have a full time job, and I doubt my boss would give a shit that I cheat at cards. He just won’t invite me to poker night anymore, and I’m not even the biggest cheater out of the bunch!”

My vision began to turn red, but I subtly forced away the urge to smash his face into the table with a shrill scream. My mouth was shut so I knew he would barely hear it. “So what punishment do you think you’ll be handed by the law, huh? You could’ve cost a very important businessman a lot of money, and they don’t take very kindly to that. I’d say that’s at least deserving of 10, maybe 20 years in the slammer?”

“Ha!” Hank shot back. “How about a hundred or two hundred dollars? And that’s going to be a piece of cake, especially with what I got paid for this job! So why don’t you go home to the casino ‘Mr. Security Man’ and send the other lady back in?”

“Fucking hell, man!” I shot back, finally losing a grip on my frustration and letting everything spill out my mouth. “Don’t you have a girlfriend also locked up here?! How the hell can you just sit

here banging police officers when she's probably scared half to death in some holding cell?"

"What's the worry?" the cheater replied with a cocky smile. "This room is soundproof, and she ain't gonna to find out what I'm doing with Christy!"

"God dammit, I'm not talking about you… cheating?" an epiphany struck. "But now that you brought that up, I wonder how soundproof these walls really are?"

"I dunno, that blonde chick and I got pretty wild in here before you showed up," he nervously chuckled.

"Well then, I HOPE HANK'S GIRLFRIEND DOESN'T FIND OUT THAT HE'S HAVING SEX WITH SOMEONE ELSE!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.

"Hey, hey! No need to test it out, and not like that!"

"Why? You scared she might find out?" I asked with my own smug grin for a change. "Don't worry, I think these walls really *are* soundproof!"

The cheater let out a sigh in relief.

"But I'm more than capable of leaving this room."

"Seriously dude, knock it off. It's not funny," said Hank fearfully.

"So it looks like there *is* something you're scared of!" I replied with a sadistic grin. "I could walk out of this room right now and scream it to the whole station, and there's nothing that can stop me!"

"If you do that, nobody here's going to trust you to interrogate anyone here anymore. You're going to ruin the fun for everyone!"

"Oh come on, if everyone does it, why do they hate the idea of cheating so much?" I asked angrily. "It makes no fucking sense!"

"Because it's just *wrong*?" Hank asked rhetorically, as if it was common knowledge. "…But we still gotta do it! It's like asking people

not to bother having sex at all! So of *course* everyone keeps it on the down-low." He almost looked guilty after saying that. "But at least it creates some pretty juicy drama, so Ultarian won't be *too* mad about it."

"But then why not just accept that part of you and have an open relationship or something?" I asked exasperated. "Sounds like that would be way easier than just breaking each other's hearts."

"Because… Naomi is *my* girl!" Hank coughed out. I tried to make eye contact to eke out anything else from him, but the cheater's eyes were closed tight. It almost looked like he was wincing from a headache, but I couldn't tell whether he was faking it or not.

"Whatever," I whispered to myself. So it looked like Hank was the jealous type, but what the hell *was* that? The sheer cognitive dissonance that Hank just threw out there didn't sound natural, but at the same time, it weirdly made sense. The way he talked about how everyone else felt the same way about it, especially about how all of this cheating was supposedly an open secret, perfectly fit what was wrong with this world. Perfectly down to a T.

But despite how messed up this place was, there was a place, a man, that tried to keep the worst of it away from his employees. And I still had a job to do for him.

"Does it look like I work here?" I asked, pointing at my work badge for the third time today. "Do you think I give a shit what some officers think about me pissing in their little sandbox?"

"…shit. Please don't tell my girlfriend!"

"Tell me who your boss is, and I'll keep my lips sealed."

"Fine," he said with a heavy sigh. "I don't have an actual name, but the guy really did call himself Lady Quirova. And we only met at dead drops, the next one's supposed to be tomorrow at 9 pm on the bench next to the roller rink on Queen Street."

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" I asked, flashing Hank a tired, yet victorious smile.

“But seriously dude, please don’t tell her!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. If it turns out you’re wrong, I’ll need some kind of leverage to get you to talk more.”

The cheater looked down in relief.

“Though to be honest, she’s probably in her own interrogation room where she’s getting *ravaged* by another police officer.”

“Fuck off! She wouldn’t do that! Take it back!”

I silently stared at him, perplexed by his hypocrisy.

He looked me right in the eye before looking back at the ground in defeat. “She wouldn’t,” he whimpered.

I didn’t reply. I simply walked out of the interrogation room.

[Skill Obtained! Intimidation (lv 1)]

Chapter 53: Hide yo' Kids, Hide yo' Wife

I began to walk towards the other interrogation room, the one holding Hank's girlfriend. I wanted to corroborate his story, maybe even spill the beans about her boyfriend, and just make sense of everything around me. Because after my little chat with Hank, nothing did anymore!

What was up with this world? Was it something in the water, or the air? A casual look around would be enough to see that almost nobody put much weight into faithfulness in a relationship, and a single whim is enough to make someone cheat. And yet, with an entirely straight face, Hank told me that fidelity was worth its weight in gold. The worst part was that I believed him.

And with how everyone else seemed to react to being cheated on, he wasn't the only one to hypocritically hold that belief. Honestly, who knew what was going on with this place and the people who lived here? I was feeling tired, I didn't want to care any more. At least I didn't have to anymore, having found what I was looking for in a job and partner who were actually sane.

But for the sake of that job, I still had business to attend to here, and that was interrogating Hank's girlfriend.

Asking another police officer, I found out that her interrogation chamber was in a different part of the relatively small building. It wouldn't be a long walk, but the path led me back through the front desk, and who I saw there made me stop in my tracks.

Well, two people. The first was another officer, but wearing a suit and tie, with a very fancy badge pinned to their side. If anything, this was some kind of high ranking detective or the police chief. This alone wouldn't have made me do a double take, but who they were walking with did. A woman in a gray pinstripe suit with a white fedora and purple tie followed behind him holding a familiar briefcase. The two were laughing as they casually made their way across the tiled floor, kicking up the dust that probably hadn't been swept up in years, judging by the size of the clouds. I was starting to think it was always there, judging by how the two didn't pay it much

mind.

I didn't mind it much now either, as I used the dust as a cover to sneak my way past them. By some miracle, they hadn't noticed me, likely because they entered a massive coughing fit just when I would've been in their field of view. It wasn't often I got a lucky break, and I didn't question it as I made my way out the front door and to my car.

[Skill Obtained! Stealth (lv 1)]

Was it me, or was I unlocking a *lot* of new Skills? Maybe it was because I was level ten now, or that I was doing a lot more now?

"Good thing I didn't write my real name," I mumbled to myself as I started my car and drove out of the parking lot. "No wait, I mean my fake name. My real-fake name- fuck!" I sped over the speed bump and flinched at my car impacting the road.

I let out a sigh of relief as I entered the freeway. With some time before I got to my next destination, I had time to think about the information I got from Hank. Apparently Goldshanks was right, there *was* someone organizing the cheaters and supplying them with advanced means of going about their dirty work.

And the only lead I had was a "Lady Quirova" and a drop-off tomorrow at 9 pm at a nearby roller rink. It wasn't much, but it was a start. I'd probably check out the area today to make sure there isn't already something there, and then scout the place out a few hours before the actual drop-off to see if I could catch the perpetrator red handed.

I would've loved to stake the place out starting now like it was a department store on black friday… actually, no, I would've hated doing that. But the point was I couldn't. My efforts were most needed at Goldshanks' casino during the tournament to make sure any other cheaters didn't advance. Catching whoever was behind all of this was just a bonus, one that would make my boss happy, but not define the fate of the tournament or his business. And he was a boss I wanted to make happy after he did the same for me.

Well, there wasn't much else to think about, at least not regarding the tournament and cheaters. But there was plenty to still think about when it came to my personal safety.

I parked my car and got out, making my way to the gun store and giving the shopkeeper my best Charisma-enhanced smile.

"Oh, where's your wife?" the man asked me with a raised eyebrow. "You said *she* was the one who was going to pick this up."

"Huh? Oh yeah. She couldn't make it today, she was super busy with something else."

"Too busy for me?!" the shopkeeper exclaimed.

I just gave him a look, and through the power of Charisma, or maybe even a healthy dose of self-realization, he turned beet red.

"I-I mean, you made it sound like she was super excited for this, so I had it gift-wrapped and everything for her."

"She is, but she'll open it soon." I felt a little bad, so I decided to toss him a non-existent bone. "But she doesn't really know how to shoot it, and I don't have the time to teach her, so she'll need someone who knows a lot about guns to help her. How about you?"

"Me?" His lips creaked into the beginnings of a smile he futilely tried to hide behind a look of confusion. "Well, I don't know if-"

"Nah, you definitely know what you're doing, you've probably been shooting for a decade!"

"Three, actually, since I was a young boy." The shopkeeper began to scratch the back of his head.

"Even more of a reason!" I exclaimed with a clap. "Listen, she's a really slow learner, so she'll need a *lot* of time, I'm thinking something like two hours a week? For however long it takes."

"Two?! I mean, of course, that sounds about right."

"Great, then! I'll take the gun, and we can discuss payment for the

classes afterwards."

"Of course, and as a thank you gift to show your wife how dedicated I am to teaching her, I'll give you a box of ammo for free!"

"You're too kind, I'll let my wife know how great of a guy you are!" I let out a polite chuckle that turned into a bitter hack as soon as I left the store.

I felt bad for taking advantage of that man… a little bit, but I really didn't want to make a habit out of it. I just used the System to make things more convenient for me because I was pretty sure my life was on the line. Who knew when the Fatewatcher would try to attack me again? I still paid for the gun, albeit while skipping the usual firearms checks, so it wasn't like I was committing a *real* crime. But on the other hand, using the gun on another person *was* a crime, and they were very likely trying to kill me! And besides… the Fatewatcher wasn't a person.

I let out another sigh as I drove towards the roller rink. By some miracle, the area around it was incredibly quiet, and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary as I circled around the block in my car. No drop-offs under benches or in trash cans, and no shady looking people in trench coats. [Situational Awareness] helped tremendously with that, in fact enough that-

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 7 -> 8]

That was always nice to see. After one more loop around the block, I decided to call it a day and headed back home. The way back was equally uneventful. I parked my car in the employee reserved spot and headed to my place with my things. I was ready to head inside and collapse on my bed for a nap before dinner.

But instead, I froze in place and began to claw at the gift wrapping on my gun.

The front door was cracked open, and I could hear a rustling sound from inside. I knew the Fatewatcher was bold, even aloof enough to break into my house, but he was always direct. He punched me in the chest, and tried to run me over with a truck! He did show off how

strong he was at one point instead of trying to murder me, but that was just a show of intimidation, but he'd always be gone before I could do anything about it.

This was the first time I had the drop on him!

I took a pair of shells and loaded them into the double barrel shotgun with another handful stuffed into my pocket and kicked my front door all the way open.

"Alright, motherfucker, eat hot lead!" I screamed while leveling the gun at my target…

I felt a wave of dizziness flow over me as I tried to focus on the figure pilfering through my cabinet drawers. My entire place was a mess, with loose sheets of paper and knick knacks scattered about across the floor. But that disorganized mess was easier to look at than the burglar. He… I think it was a he… I felt a sudden ache in my head.

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 8 -> 9]

[Situational Awareness Perk Obtained! Improved Focus]

With the level up and new perk, I was suddenly able to get a better look at the intruder. It was definitely a man, and he wore what I could only describe as body armor that held a black-grayish sheen. On his head was a pitch-black ski mask that covered everything but his eyes and mouth, and he wore baggy camouflage pants.

As the wave of dizziness dissipated, I realized that whatever kept me from focusing on him wasn't normal. Without the levels I already had in [Situational Awareness], I was almost certain he would've been completely invisible to me, or at least I wouldn't have been able to *comprehend* him being in front of me. I remembered reading about something like that back home; information that was self-deleting, or that was at least really difficult to remember like a complex math formula. It was called an antimeme.

And this kind of antimeme was entirely supernatural.

"Wait, you can see me?"

“Yes.” I pulled the trigger.

A loud boom echoed through the room and outside, and I felt my arms go flying by several inches from the recoil. In retrospect, I should have placed the stock of the gun on my shoulder for stability, but I was still able to keep hold of it with my sixteen points in Strength.

But holding onto the gun was the least of my worries.

I fucking shot someone! Whoever that burglar was, he definitely wasn’t the Fatewatcher, and I just shot another man! Oh god, maybe Shovon was right, maybe I really was a murderer?

Before I could really begin to freak out, I looked over to see the burglar still standing. The bullet hit his armor and the material seemed to ripple, as the metal turned semi-solid and distributed the force of the bullet across its body. The man still took a step back from the force of the blow, but he didn’t look much worse for wear. That stuff was better than kevlar!

“Dude, that hurt!” he shouted at me.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” I shouted back while pulling the trigger again.

Bang!

The man took the hit and another step back, but turned the momentum into a run. But rather than move towards me, he curved and sprinted towards the window, barreling through it. Broken glass flew behind him, and as soon as I made my way to the entrance, he was already getting into his car. I couldn’t see the license plate number from where I was, but I could at least…

Detect Cheating (lv 13)
Target Mazzocco
Method M/A

Wait, wasn’t that the guy from the tournament? Who was cheating using magic?!

Scout sped away before I could think to do anything else, leaving me alone in my disheveled apartment. I slowly walked over to the bathroom and removed the toilet's tank lid. Inside was the copper and sapphire bracelet, the large gemstone shining more brightly than it had any right to in the dimly lit room.

I slowly picked it up and gave it a careful look.

"So this thing really *is* magic, huh? At least I have that going for me."

I let out a long sigh and called the police. It was going to be a long evening.

Chapter 54: Healing

I stood in front of the phone. My eyes were glued to it like a hawk trying to decide if it was time to strike at its prey, to act and kick a boulder off of a steep hill, letting it make whoever was at the bottom go splat. In any other situation, calling the police would be an absolute no-brainer. My place got broken into! But the person at the bottom of that metaphorical hill was me.

I tried to shoot the burglar with a gun that I didn't have a proper license to own. But the emotional damage that man had dealt to me by breaking into *my home*? I wanted retribution, reassurance, some kind of authority to swoop in here and tell me everything was going to be alright. Someone to-

Ring.

I quickly picked up the phone and held it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hey Chuck, it's Shovon!" came an excited, yet staticky voice from the other end. "Do you want to head to the gym now?"

"I-" I was tempted to just agree and put all of this out of my head, but I looked over to the absolute mess that the burglar left. All of the scattered furniture, cushions, and sheets of paper. I let out a sigh. "I can't. My place got broken into just now and I have to clean up the mess that they made."

"What?!"

The shout was so loud even through the phone, that I had to pull the receiver away from me.

"Holy shit dude, that's horrible! You need someone by your side, I'll come over right now. Where do you live?"

"I mean, it wasn't the Fatewatcher and nothing valuable was taken, you don't have to do that," I slowly replied. "But there was still something kind of supernatural about that guy."

"Fuck that, you just went through something traumatic, what kind of

friend would I be if I wasn't there for you?"

I stood silent for a moment in contemplation. Despite the mess reducing how little space there already was, the apartment felt like it had entirely lost its cozy feeling. "Yeah, come on over. I live in Karling Apartments, building A…"

"Alright, got it. I'm on my way, you just hang tight there, everything will be alright."

"Thanks."

A moment of silence hung in the air before Shovon hummed and hung up. I slowly put the receiver back as my legs numbly shuffled over to the only sofa that hadn't been upturned, the two-seater loveseat. I was able to rest on it for about a minute before a quick series of knocking echoed out from the front door.

"Is he here already?" I mumbled to myself as I pushed myself back to my feet and headed over. "That was way too fast, was he parked outside the apartment complex or something? God, I hope he isn't secretly a stalker or something."

I pulled open the door to find myself face-to-face with my boss. Well, my first boss and the owner of the apartment complex, Hiroi. The elderly Japanese man regarded me with what I could only assume was a worried expression, though it was hard to tell behind the long, white hair that covered his eyes.

"Mike, I heard gunshots! Are you alright? Safe, unharmed?" he asked, out of breath.

"Y-yeah, I'm unharmed. But my place, not so much. There was a break in. They didn't steal anything, especially what I think they might have been looking for, but they ran through the side window and left a mess."

"That's terrible!" he exclaimed, but the worry in his posture began to fade. "Though it's a relief you're unharmed. I thought it might have been the mob. Today is collection day, and I haven't seen their man all day long, so I thought he decided to take a shot at you for how

you stood up to him last week. But seeing as it isn't the mob, I'll go ahead and call the police."

"Hold on, it's better if you don't. I've got a name and description of the burglar so there's no need for them to investigate, and… I'd rather the police not come to my place. At least not for a while."

Hiroi looked at me strangely, and I could feel a piercing gaze bore into me from behind his hair. Eventually, he nodded. "If you ask me, they're not trustworthy enough to resolve anything beyond marital disputes. Especially with them not doing anything about the mob. But the other residents probably heard the gunshots and likely called, so they still might send someone over, albeit on a low priority check up."

I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Thanks, Hiroi."

"No problem, call me if I can help! My star employee should be able to call in his boss for something like this."

As my boss made his exit, Shovon walked past him and into my apartment.

"Holy shit, dude!" he exclaimed as he looked over the mess that the burglar had left. "What happened, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright," I said weakly as I closed the front door and led him inside. "So yeah, there was a break-in. They didn't grab anything, but they made a pretty big mess. Gonna clean it up now."

"This isn't right, man. How fucking dare he?! Did you call the police yet?"

"Can't."

"Why not? They could at least try to see where he left, maybe someone got the guy's license plate?"

"There's a gun here that doesn't have a license."

"Great, then! That's evidence they can use to track him down!"

I stopped and looked towards Shovon, but I couldn't meet his eyes.

"Wait, that's your gun, isn't it?" He finally noticed the box of ammo I'd put to the side.

I slowly nodded, gaze focused on the floor.

"Why do you have a gun?"

"The Fatewatcher," I said in a low mumble-whisper. "I was going to use it on him if he tried to kill me again."

"But did you- Chuck, did you-"

"I did. I…" something cracked. All of the emotion I'd been holding onto suddenly poured out of me, out of my eyes and nose, and through my voice. "You were right, I'm a murderer, Shovon! I tried to kill that man! I shot at him!"

He moved too quickly to even realize what was happening until it was too late. With a single swift motion, Shovon closed the distance between us, wrapped his arms around my back, and… pulled me into a tight hug.

"You're not a murderer, Chuck. Everything will be alright."

I didn't respond, I only let out a long sob.

He held me there for half a minute as I let out a torrent of tears into his shirt.

"I just wanted to live a normal life! I tried my best, I keep trying, but shit like this keeps happening! First the mob's been trying to put my boss out of business, next the Fatewatcher showed up and keeps trying to kill me, and now the break in! That last one though, it hits so close to home. I've never felt this vulnerable before in my life."

Shovon didn't reply immediately, he only continued to hug me. When he finally did, he started with an unsteady chuckle. "Then it's a good thing you missed."

"I didn't miss. Either time."

Shovon's head quickly faced down towards mine. "Then how come there's no blood or body?"

"His armor absorbed the blow, like some kind of magical or futuristic material," I mumbled through his chest.

"What?!"

"I only fired because he had some weird mental cloaking thing going on, where everything about him just tried to slip around my mind, like he *couldn't* be remembered at all."

"An antimeme?" asked Shovon in shock.

"They have those here too?"

"What was that?"

"Uh, nothing," I said quickly.

"So you shot him because you thought he was related to the Fatewatcher?"

"Yup."

"So then why are you beating yourself up over it?" asked Shovon, releasing me from the bear hug but still holding me in front of him by my shoulders. There was a massive smile plastered on his face. "Come on, let me help you clean up. We can call that our workout for today."

The rest of the evening went by quickly, with the two of us moving through my apartment like a pair of well-oiled machines. Throughout it, Shovon kept giving me these looks. When I looked over to him, he'd always change it to a bright smile, but when I'd caught him otherwise, they looked hesitant. There was no hesitation about me, but it was as if he wanted to say something, and couldn't bring himself to say it.

Eventually, night fell and we ordered delivery. After eating while watching some TV, we parted ways.

As I lay in bed that night with the supposedly bracelet in my hands, ready to fall into my dreams, I couldn't help but wonder what Shovon wanted to tell me. Deep down beneath it all, I felt the tiniest spark of fear, one that reminded me of the kind of world I lived in. Knowing this world, I feared that what he had to say was probably something I didn't want to hear. But it was Shovon. I trusted him.

And honestly, that was a kind of magic in and of itself.

The bracelet let off a faint glow for just a moment as I fell asleep.

[Skill Obtained! …

sKiLl oBTAIn…

[Warning: Magic already reserved for System use!]

[System recalibrating…]

[Skill Obtained! Magic (lv 1)]

Chapter 55: A Worst Kind of Cheater

The next morning, I got out of bed on time and finished working my first job in record time. It seemed that either Ultarian Festival Week was finally settling down, or my [Tinker] Skill was getting really powerful.

[Skill Level Up! Tinker 9-> 10]

Powerful enough in fact that the level ups were beginning to slow down, despite how hard I worked.

[Tinker Perk Obtained! Build: Simple Mechanism]

But on the other hand, I now had a new avenue to gain experience from! But chances were, just like with repairs, whatever I built likely had to be sexual in nature for me to actually get a level up. So the Skill had essentially peaked! But I didn't mind, I was an absolute machine at my job, so I didn't really need any more than I already had.

Once all of those tasks were completed, I very thoroughly washed my hands, changed into my suit, and drove over to the casino to start my second job. On the way, I opened up the System menu to take a look at what my new [Tinker] perk did, and almost drove onto the sidewalk.

"Magic?! How the hell is that a Skill, and when did I get that?" I shouted out loud.

After getting back control of my car, I looked at my wrist. The magical bracelet was hidden underneath my suit, far up my arm so as to not show. So it actually was magical, huh? Maybe I could practice magic later.

It annoyed me to no end to think that. Later. A childhood dream was sitting on my wrist right now, but I thought my actual responsibilities were more important? When did I get so old and boring?

With a sigh, I put the thought behind me and entered the casino's

parking lot. Once I was parked and at the entrance, the bouncers at the front door let me in without any complaints, and I regarded them and the casino floor with a ready smile.

The bleachers contained an even bigger audience than before, and the place was starting to feel packed despite the fact that there were fewer poker tables laid out on the casino floor. It was a strange feeling. Almost as if the remaining players weighed more on the room than those who had already played and lost.

As the players began to roll in, I could hear the wheels of several cars pull up to the main entrance in a quick succession. Something seemed strange about it, so I decided to head outside and get a quick look.

A white limousine had pulled up to the casino, with several hulking SUVs surrounding it. Coming out of the front SUV was a man in a dark suit with sunglasses, who made his way to the limo. He opened the elongated door and two people exited, quickly making their way past me and inside the building. But not before one of the sunglass wearers shoved me to the side.

In total, it was two men dressed in black suits and black sunglasses, with visible earpieces and holstered pistols, sandwiching a man in a perfect fitting white suit who held a briefcase in his right hand. As he approached the tables, he handed his baggage to the man on his left, and went to meet with my boss who was now walking over with a wide grin. The two chatted for a bit before the man in the white suit took his seat among the players.

“Woah, who’s that guy?” I asked Mr. Goldshanks as he approached me and the other guests. “Never seen someone come here with that kind of an entourage before.”

“That’s because you haven’t been here for that long, but we occasionally get VIPs like that once in a while,” replied my boss with a smile. “That there’s Ian Wachowski, a really high ranking officer in the military.”

“High enough to have his own secret service agents with him?”

“Indeed. And he happens to be quite the poker player too, which is why he was invited to the quarterfinals directly.”

“That explains why I didn’t see him earlier. He would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb.” On a whim, I decided to hit him with [Detect Cheating], just out of curiosity. He was definitely the last person I expected to cheat at a poker tournament.

Detect Cheating (lv 14)
Target: Wachowski
Method: Misuse of Privileged Secrets

“Hey boss, are there any kind of secrets that could give a player an edge?” I asked.

“Hm? Not really, unless it’s secrets about the security or the other players. But I bet everyone knows about you by now, and knowing your opponent is part of the game!”

“Yeah, that figures,” I shrugged. I guess whatever he *was* cheating, it wasn’t at cards. If he was doing something specific, the Skill would’ve told me.

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 14 -> 15]

[Detect Cheating Perk Obtained! Information: Victim]

Huh, would you look at that? So let me see who exactly Mr. Army bigwig really was cheating on.

Detect Cheating (lv 15)
Target: Wachowski
Method: Misuse of Privileged Secrets
Victim: United States Government

WHAT THE FUCK?!

My eyes bulged and mouth dropped as I stared at the man in the white suit, the high ranking army officer. The traitor. Of course in a world of little loyalty would there be people who’d betray their country.

But what was I going to do about it? This wasn't my problem, or my boss'. It wasn't like selling military secrets to the Russians or whatever national enemy of the decade was going to ruin the tournament or Mr. Goldshanks' reputation. I knew sticking my nose into that man's business would be dangerous, and bring me trouble that I *absolutely* didn't need, but still. Should I at least try to tell someone about him?

Should I?

After everything that had happened in the past two weeks, I *really* wanted to live hands-off, to tell the world that I just didn't care about all of the drama it dangled down my throat. But this was something that could come to bite me, bite everyone I care about here, in the ass. Hard.

But even if I tried, it wasn't like anyone would believe me if I did! "Hey guys, Ian Wachowski's a traitor! What did he do? Hell if I know, but send over the police to cuff the naughty lad anyway!"

Seriously, what the hell was I going to do?

"Hey Mike, you don't look so good," said my boss, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Everything alright?"

"Hey, Mr. Goldshanks," I slowly began. "I've got a hypothetical question. If I found out one of the players was doing something bad, like *felony illegal, prison-for-life* bad, but it doesn't affect the tournament, what should I do?"

"I'd say call the police. I personally don't care if they're a hotshot or audience favorite, if they're doing something really bad then they've gotta answer for it."

"Alright, but what if they might retaliate if they find out it was you, and you don't have any actual proof of what they've done?"

"Well then…" Goldshanks thought for a moment before continuing. "I'd say *safely* find out what you can, and leave an anonymous tip. The wellbeing of my employees is more important than whatever's going on in the wider world. And that includes you, Mike."

“Thanks,” I replied with a soft smile. “That really makes me feel a bit better.”

“Don’t mention it. Now was there someone in particular you’re talking about? I feel that this might not just be hypothetical.” I traced the path of his eyes to Ian Wachowski, but could see a puzzled look in them. “Have you met Ian before?”

“Nope, first time seeing him, ever,” I answered honestly.

My boss simply nodded. “Stay safe, Mike. And don’t do anything that’ll put you in danger.”

“I won’t boss, I won’t.”

Mr. Goldshanks took a seat amongst the audience members and turned his attention to the games. I did the same, trying to distract myself from the fact that a traitor to the country was taking part in them.

As I found and caught several more minor cheaters, I considered my boss’ words carefully. As much as I wanted to, the fact that there was a traitor who could’ve been selling anything between a formula for experimental super-roofies to goddamn nuclear launch codes meant I could be putting everyone I knew and marginally cared about in danger by letting him get away.

Of course, I didn’t have to confront him or play at any counter-espionage. I could just leave an anonymous tip to the FBI and they might handle it. Of course, simply giving a name wasn’t going to get any kind of investigation started on him, I’d have to give them a bone first.

And like hell was I going to get my hands dirty to do that! I wasn’t going to dive into that kind of drama, I had the System to do all of the heavy lifting, and I’d be able to do it while standing in the background! I had a way out; a way to do what was right without suffering the consequences. But as it was, it didn’t give me much to work with. I was limited by my available Skills and their levels.

Just a few minutes ago, I went from not suspecting a thing to having

the shock of my life, so I had the answer right in front of me. What would anyone do in a video game when they weren't strong enough to face the next challenge?

Grind.

Chapter 56: Tournament Day 4

This week just seemed to be getting worse and worse, and I wasn't sure how much farther fate would take this sick joke. On top of all of my current problems, there was a new one brewing at work. It probably wouldn't affect me, or anyone I actually know in any way, so it was really tempting to just forget about it and get on with my life.

On the other hand, it was hard to forget about a traitor to my country playing poker just a few feet away from me.

I really hated myself for sticking my nose into something that is *absolutely* beyond my pay grade, but I only stuck in the tip. In the sense that I wasn't confronting him directly. Just collecting whatever evidence I could from a distance using my Skills to pass on to the proper authorities once I had something concrete to give.

The problem was, I didn't exactly have anything "concrete." At least with my current levels. So it was time to grind, but I couldn't exactly run off work to start throwing around my Skills. Besides, I only started this job so I *could* grind! However, things were going pretty slowly today.

[Detect Cheating]. Nope, they're clean.

…

Clean.

…

Cleanerino.

…

Clean-tastic.

Wait- no, they're just cheating on their spouse, not at cards. Clean… ish.

To use [Detect Cheating] so many times without a hit was like trying to sniff each flower in a bouquet and getting stale air instead. It drove on my mind to the point I needed a break. Since this round had about an hour left, I figured it would be safe to leave for a few minutes and grab breakfast.

My mouth opened wide in awe as I looked at today's spread. While the last few days were pretty mediocre, it was now the quarterfinals and some of the biggest names in poker were finally taking part. And to give them the experience they deserved, the catering was upgraded to world-class levels.

All of the slices of cheese and meat were perfectly fresh, with the only mold present on the gorgonzola, but who was going to eat that anyway? Of those cheeses, most of them had labels placed next to them on delicate little signs. They showed off a name, as well as their country of origin, most of them being from somewhere in Europe. The fruits and veggies were perfectly crisp and flavorful, to the point that none of the bananas even had a brown single spot! The meats, though? Every kind of cut under the sun was organized neatly on several boards, and there was even a large bowl of caviar!

Picking out the best looking and smelling ingredients, I put myself together an impressive sandwich using a pair of bagel buns as the bread. Swiss cheese, some pastrami, still warm bacon, lettuce, tomato, and some cream cheese gave me the best looking sandwich I'd seen since I came to this world.

As I balanced the culinary tower on a paper plate with a cup of milky coffee in my other hand, slowly made my way over to a corner to sit down and enjoy my meal in peace, I was interrupted by a voice coming from behind.

"Damn, you really know how to make a sandwich! That thing looks good!" exclaimed a woman dressed in the green attendant's uniform. I recognized her as one of Kamila's friends. During the emergency team meeting, the trio she was part of didn't quite clap as much for me as the others, but she was still the only one out of those three who didn't openly glare at me.

"Uh, thanks!" I replied with an awkward smile, before composing

myself enough to properly reply. “If you want, I could get you one too. But this one’s mine, I’m not parting with this masterpiece.”

“Oh, you’d do that for me?” the lady asked with wide eyes and a finger to her pouting lips. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Er, no?” I replied with a confused look that quickly turned into exasperation. “Just trying to be polite.”

“I guess Kamila *was* wrong about you, then! You don’t seem like some kind of predator,” she chuckled, holding out her hand. “I’m Beatrice, by the way!”

“Mike,” I replied, looking down at my own two hands which were busy grasping my brunch. “So what made you decide to give me a chance? Kamila and her other friend didn’t seem all too happy with me.”

“Well,” began Beatrice. “I like to consider myself the office gossip, and being polite to everyone is the best way to find juicy details! And word has it, you haven’t acted untoward anyone since you started, so I don’t see why I should be scared of you.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good to hear. But it kind of sucks that she’s made her feelings about me clear to all the other employees.”

“Mmh, I don’t really blame her though. She’s our mama bear, after all. And I read they have a tendency to maul people who don’t even mean their kids any harm!”

“Is she really that protective of you all?”

“Of course! After everything we’ve been through before working for Goldshanks, how can she not?”

I looked at Beatrice with a knowing look.

“Ooh, I see it in you too! You know *exactly* what I’m talking about! In the last place I worked, my boss took this cheerful demeanor as flirting and tried to blackmail me into having sex with him.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I groaned.

“I really hope that comment was aimed at him and not me.”

“At him, at him,” I quickly replied, trying to hold my hands out defensively, but instead just lifting my sandwich by a few inches. “Something like that was happening at my bank, where the tellers were all being blackmailed like that too.”

“Aww, those poor employees! I really hope they have somewhere else they can work like here, but this place is one in a million. Maybe they could work for a credit union?”

“Well thankfully it isn’t a problem any longer, since I helped them unionize.”

“You what?!” replied Beatrice in a fit of giggles. “Kamila really *was* wrong! You’re definitely one of us! Just don’t say the U word anywhere near Goldshanks, or he’ll have your ass on the street before you know it.”

“Oh fuck, really?!” I whispered, quickly looking around me to make sure nobody was listening in.

“Nah, I’m just messing with you! He’s pretty generous with the pay so we never really considered it. Honestly, he’d probably consider a union as an easier way to figure out what we all want from him without asking us all himself.”

“Damn, this really *is* a one in a million place to work.”

“Sure is! And that’s why Kamila’s so protective. Give her some more time and I’m sure she’ll warm up to you. In fact, I think I’ll even put in a good word for you!”

“Thanks, Beatrice. Here’s hoping that day comes soon, I think she’s someone I’d like to be friends with.”

After giving each other a nod, we went our separate ways. I found a nice table with a good view of the players and took a seat with my sandwich.

It really was a thing of beauty, this culinary construct, and nothing could ruin it for me. But before I could take the first bite and

properly enjoy it, I was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat behind me.

With an eye roll, I turned around, not bothering to put down my food. I came face to face with a woman with long, curly red hair. It wasn't a natural shade of red, but rather the kind of dark red or maroon you got from hair dyes that still advertised themselves as the real deal. Beyond that, she wore a thin layer of makeup that accentuated all of her facial features, and a black satin gown that accentuated everything below that.

From my time in this world, I was expecting her to have some kind of permanently sultry look upon her face, but instead I was greeted by a permanent scowl.

"So you're the one catching all of the cheaters, huh?" she quickly asked. "You're in charge of security?"

"I'm the one catching them, but I'm not in charge." My eyes impatiently shifted to the sandwich in my hands and then back to her. "Talk to Todd, he's probably in the back, but that place is employees only."

"Damn, just giving me the cold shoulder like that?" she replied with a sharp smile. "I don't think I've met a man who can actually control himself around me. It's pretty refreshing!"

"Yeah, well," I lifted up my sandwich. "This looks *much* more attractive to me right now."

"Oh man, we totally could've been friends in another life! But…" there was a sparkle in her eyes as something in her voice changed. It became filled with a sort of infectious confidence that grabbed the attention of everyone around. "I'm going to need you to drive off a cliff."

"Excuse me?" I asked with a furrowed brow.

"I need you to put that sandwich down, head to your car, and start driving North towards the nearest cliffs. Then, I want you to drive off of them and die."

“Oh sure, sure. How about if *you* eat shit?” I shot back.

“W-what did you say?” she asked in shock.

“I said, ‘eat shit’, asshole. Why don’t *you* jump off a cliff?”

The color began to drain from her face. Her reaction wasn’t in indignance, I could see. It was genuine fear.

She quickly turned around and ran out the door. I didn’t mind, I just got back to my sandwich.

“So Mike, what did you get off of her?” came another familiar voice before I could take a bite of my sandwich.

If it were anyone else, I would’ve told them to get lost, but I wasn’t about to tell that to my boss. “What do you mean, Mr. Goldshanks?” I asked.

“That was Victoria Palmer, of Victoria’s Garden. One of the sponsors?”

“Son of a…” I mumbled to myself as I dropped the sandwich and began to run out the door after her.

I made it outside and didn’t see her there, nor in the parking lot. I was hoping to hit her with [Detect Cheating], but she seemed to have already left. Maybe her car was right by the entrance or something, or perhaps she ran on foot.

But what was up with that reaction? It was already weird that someone would feel that way about *me* telling them off, but the owner of a massive casino… and likely head of the mob?

“Something’s going on, and I have no idea what to do about it.”

I let out a sigh and headed back into the casino to finally get a bite of my breakfast and do my job. The sandwich was gone by the time I came back.

Chapter 57: Magic Practice

“So this is what it feels like to sit in a padded cell,” I mumbled to myself.

I sat in a chair facing the poker players, an empty table in front of me. There should’ve been a sandwich on top, but it wasn’t.

Just like how I should’ve been out grinding because an actual traitor to the United States was playing poker only a few feet away from me and I couldn’t do a goddamn thing about it without getting my [Detect Cheater] Skill higher. And there weren’t any cheaters around, so I wasn’t leveling up now, and I couldn’t exactly leave to go grind elsewhere because sitting here was my job!

So yeah. I felt very confined at that moment being stuck there with nothing to do. I tapped my toes, tried humming a tune, and imagined kicking that Fatewatcher in the ribs, but none of it really helped all that much. I needed something to actually *do*.

While idly scratching at my wrist, I noticed what I was wearing on it underneath my suit; the magical bracelet. I apparently gained a new Skill last night, but must have fallen asleep before the notification hit me. It wasn’t there when I woke up like with my night with Elsie, which was annoying, but I was still grateful for whatever I could get.

“So, magic. [Magic]. What does that do, exactly?” I asked myself as I tried to poke around my brain for the activation.

There didn’t seem to be one, but instead, I found a bit of insight. It told me to focus my mind on the bracelet and the “magical energies” within, and draw them into myself.

I mentally shrugged and tried just that. Closing my eyes and concentrating on the arcane jewelry, I could feel a faint *something* within. With a light tug, that *something* began to seep out of the bracelet and into the air, and with another yank, it began to filter into my skin. From the skin through my flesh and into my bloodstream, the magic flowed. I felt my whole body suffused, even if lightly, with the strange energy.

It didn't make me feel like jumping up and dancing around, or like I could take on the world with a hand tied behind my back. The sensation was more like holding onto the first domino in a chain that would spring up wherever I pointed it.

My eyes began to wander around the casino in search of a target for my domino chain, but opened wide when I found it.

Seated amongst the audience was a man. An ordinary looking one if he wore normal clothes, but instead he wore something a little more… gaudy. Full red velvet suit gaudy.

"Zane," I angrily mumbled as I looked at him taking a bite out of- that motherfucker was eating my sandwich!

Without even thinking, I pointed the magical energy within me at the breakfast thief and let it loose. It crossed the space between us in an instant, and manifested within the meal, making it vibrate. Zane ignored it and leaned in to take a second bite of the culinary masterpiece. Rather than get a mouthful of deliciousness, he got a faceful of deli meat as the sandwich exploded and rained condiments and toppings all over his luxuriant clothes.

"That'll teach you, asshole," I mumbled to myself with a predatory grin of my own.

[Skill Level Up! Magic lv 1 -> 2]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge lv 6 -> 7]

As the rival casino owner quickly got up to run to the bathroom, I remembered my previous mistake with Victoria and rectified it.

[Detect Cheating]

Detect Cheating (lv 15)
Target Zane Fleming
Method Bribing employees
Victim Victoria Fleming

Nope, he was clean. Very surprisingly clean, though he probably had a long laundry list of cheating he was likely guilty of beyond just this.

But the Skill prioritized *recent* cheating, so that meant he was clean for the tournament. Though there weren't any cheaters today yet…

Detect Cheating (lv 15)
Target Alexander Nara
Method Reflecting cards
Victim Poker Tournament

My head darted over in surprise as [Situational Awareness] dragged it over. It then rubber banded back to Zane to confirm if he was also guilty.

Detect Cheating (lv 15)
Target Fleming
Method Bribing employees
Victim Fleming

No, he wasn't!

I let the man run out in embarrassment before turning to the task before me.

So, mirrors. What did that exactly mean? Alexander was currently looking at his cards as he made a series of confident bets. To no one's surprise, he won that round. When the next one started and the dealer began to pass out cards, he leaned back in his seat and craned his neck upwards. It wasn't a normal stretch, since his head stopped moving back well before it would have been comfortable. In that much too awkward position, he opened his eyes and looked carefully at something in the distance before coming out of his stretch.

I followed his gaze and saw just that. A mirror. It was a relatively large one, pointed downwards, and I was certain it gave him a perfect view of his opponents' cards.

It would be easy to just call over a bouncer and have him ejected, but something else came to mind. I tugged on the bracelet and let the magical energy suffuse me once more. Rather than letting it all out at once, however, I tried to focus only a little bit of it on the mirror.

Creak

It moved! Alexander didn't seem to notice since he was busy focusing on the other players' bets, so he was completely unaware as I began to slowly rotate it.

After a second, the mirror caught the light off of a particularly bright light fixture and reflected it like a single beam towards the ground. I saw where it was and began to adjust the reflective surface so that it slowly traveled towards the cheater. As the next round started and he looked up, I finished moving the mirror, and filled his face with a blast of illumination.

He shrieked and fell out of his seat while I called over the nearest bouncer and sicced him on the man.

I let out a little chuckle as he was ejected from the building.

[Skill Level Up! Magic lv 2 -> 3]

Practicing magic helped with the lull, but the rush of catching a cheater helped me realize what I actually needed to properly enjoy myself.

I got out of my seat and walked back over to the catering table while licking my lips. My tongue stopped while stuck part way out however when I saw what was left. A few old cuts of bologna that were starting to smell, half a pickle, and gorgonzola cheese. Along with a pair of white bread slices, I had everything I needed to make… *a* sandwich. It wasn't the masterpiece I'd dared to bring to life earlier, but it was something.

I put together the bundle of mediocrity and quickly took a bite before anyone had the chance to interrupt. It went down a little rough, but I was pretty sure that was because the flavors didn't mesh that well.

I shrugged and headed back to my seat. And just in time to catch the next cheater of the day.

My eyes wandered over a woman who was much too confident in her bets and activated my Skill.

Detect Cheating (lv 15)
Target Tarqen Reaux

Method calculating mathematical odds
Victim Poker Tournament

I was beginning to understand the pattern in [Situational Awareness]. Cheaters apparently had a tell that differentiated them from the other players. Today it seemed that they all had way too much confidence. The Skill let me pick up on them in a crowded room subconsciously, and let me handle the rest.

But the real fun was figuring out *how* they were cheating and to expose it. Whatever did unfairly calculating the odds mean, though? Was it card counting? Because I was pretty sure [Detect Cheating] would tell me that outright. No, this was something different, something more… precise.

Andrea looked up to the sky in a stretch whenever anything happened at her table. Tracing the path of her eyes, I saw her looking at the audience. Specifically at another woman with a notepad and pen. She was quickly scribbling something on it and held up either a thumbs up or down every time. There were several others seated next to her who were doing the same thing, conferring with the thumb-throwing ringleader.

Wait, mathematical odds? Those were mathematicians in the audience! They were calculating the odds of each bet in a way that went beyond counting cards! Normally, I wouldn't care about card counting too much, since the player is just making use of the information they're allowed to have, albeit better than they have any right to. But to have a team of mathematicians calculate the odds for you? That was too far.

I slowly made my way to the audience and took a seat behind the set of calculators. I could see the numbers on their notepads, as well as tons of symbols I didn't recognize.

Well, I recognized one. Namely, the "1" I wrote down using a bit of magic and extra ink lying on the page. There was a big glob of semi-hardened ink the pen left on it that with a bit of fine control, I was able to push upwards in a very messy horizontal line.

But it must have looked enough like the number that the

mathematician gave a massive thumbs up to the cheater, who in turn went all-in.

Needless to say, they lost it all and were ejected from the game.

Not seeing them kicked out the way they deserved to be made me feel a little sick, however. No wait, even as I put them out of my mind, I still felt awful. The nausea wasn't going away, and it was only starting to get worse.

Wait, my new sandwich! I put in whatever leftover crap I could find, and that gorgonzola… that was blue cheese! It had mold in it! And it wasn't reacting well to my stomach.

Gurgle gurgle

"Bathroom, bathroom…" I frantically spoke while my eyes darted around the room. I found one within several seconds, but it was at the other end of the room, past the audience stands and play area. There were too many people in the way to be able to get there in time before…

"Oh god, why?" My face strained into a terrible grimace as I slowly rose out of my seat and tried to rush over there. I made it halfway before I was utterly certain it was too late. Nestled amongst the audience members, if I shit my pants right now, everyone would notice it. I was doomed.

But there was one last thing to try.

I pulled on the magical energy from the bracelet once more and let it fill my body. But rather than sending it flying out, I focused on pushing it into my stomach. Down the digestive tract, through my intestines, and into my colon.

"Come on, heal, *heal!*" I thought to myself as I struggled with both my bowels and the nascent spell. I didn't know what I was doing, but I hoped that [Magic] would take care of the rest.

And within a few seconds, it did.

Maybe it figured out what I was trying to do and played along, or

perhaps I was just some sort of magical prodigy? Ah, who was I kidding? I got lucky. The magic somehow worked its way into the pain and made it… evaporate. And somehow, it made the diarrhea disappear along with it.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “Magic fucking rocks!”

I pulled at the bracelet one last time to celebrate, but it came up empty.

“Yeah go figure. It’s out of juice.”

Chapter 58: GrinDing GOnE wROnG! (Gone Sexual!) (Not Clickbait)

Despite there not being many cheaters that day, the tournament still dragged on for much longer than it should have. Well, longer than *I* thought it should have. After the first round of games, there was apparently a *second* round featuring a different set of players that took just as long as the first. On the bright side, there was a one hour break in between for lunch, and my boss brought in even more catered food for it!

So despite the sheer boredom of not having anything to do, along with the stress of a traitor sitting only a few feet away from me… I'd been saying that a lot, hadn't I? But anyway, the joy of good food helped make up for all of those things. A little. I got stressed and bored again after another hour.

Well, the quarterfinals eventually ended and I was finally able to leave.

On the way out, I caught sight of the traitor, Ian Wachowski, talking into his phone.

"Where are you? What happened to the plan?" he said, with [Situational Awareness] feeding me his lines. "What do you mean 'complications'?!"

His face began to grow pale as whoever was on the other end spoke. I couldn't tell much about it other than it was feminine.

"Oh… oh god…" With a deep breath, he shook the fear off and replied with a resolute grimace. "It's too late, we can't change things now with only one more day left. Just tell me who I should be watching out for. Ok, got it."

He gave the casino a look around before exiting out the front door with his two bodyguards, and I could've sworn he locked eyes with me for a second. Though he did the same with the rest of Goldshanks' employees. Damn, paranoia was a bitch sometimes.

He finally left the building, finally leaving me to myself. And with an apparent deadline of tomorrow. If I was going to have any chance at uncovering what he was up to enough to report it to the proper authorities, I needed to start grinding. And hard.

And so, after an early dinner of a cheeseburger and slice of apple pie, and a bit of a break to recharge myself, I headed to somewhere I could kill two birds with one stone.

The roller rink was a great place to enjoy yourself, stretch your legs, and meet new people, but I was here to do more. So much more.

The biggest reason was to intercept a dead drop; the cheater I interrogated at the police station yesterday said that there was one scheduled around here in about two hours. It was a damn shame they were going to be unable to make it, on account of being in jail, but I'd do them a favor and pick it up for them. Along with whoever was dropping the stuff off. With how lax the interrogation "techniques" and punishments were for criminals in this world, their boss might not believe the old spot to be compromised, and might not even stop the deliveries! It was a gamble, but it was also the only lead I had so far.

The more biggest reason I was here was to grind my Skills, especially [Detect Cheating]. A high ranking military officer was selling off government secrets, and as much as I wanted to just avoid that hornet's nest, I couldn't out of fear for whatever he was selling coming to bite my ass in the future. Confronting him directly, or even with whatever half-assed attempt at counter-espionage I could muster, absolutely wasn't worth the trouble and pain it could bring me. So I opted for a more passive response.

I hoped to level up my Skills to the point I'd be able to get more information about what precisely he was doing. It happened before, where getting [Detect Cheating] to a higher level made it reveal more detailed information about its targets, even without a perk. If I could get it high enough tonight to get some more juicy details, I'd be able to leave a good enough tip to get the FBI moving against him.

And finally, the secret third reason… It had been a long day and I just wanted to have some fun.

I'd taken the time to prepare for tonight, having popped both an ibuprofen and acetaminophen pill after dinner and bringing a small notepad with me. I took a series of long, deep breaths, both to relax my mind and psych myself out for what I was about to do.

"I wish I wasn't so desperate," I said as I searched my mind for a certain switch I hadn't flipped in quite a long time. I *really* didn't want to do this, especially with how awful it felt earlier, but with only a day or two to get [Detect Cheating] high enough to obtain more information on Ian Wachowski, I didn't have many options. But maybe all of my level ups in this and all my other Skills would mitigate it? I had to go for speed, and there was only one tool I had that could grant it.

I flipped the switch to activate [Detect Cheating]'s passive form.

"Huh, that's not so bad- WOAH!"

I was hit with a massive wave of psychic force, feelings of jealousy, lust, desperation, and all sorts of negativity flooded my senses. They weren't mine, I knew they weren't, but it was as if I was standing in the collective shoes of everyone here and experiencing the worst aspects of their psyches.

Nausea was beginning to take hold as the psionic assault froze me in place, and I tried desperately to push it down. Somehow despite how much stronger it was than the last time I used it, I was able to handle it much better, likely thanks to some part of me having grown stronger through the System. But only in that I wasn't writhing in agony on the floor right now.

I got a few strange looks from the other skaters, but I didn't pay them much mind. No wait, I was paying them *plenty* of mind since they were all in my head! Oh god, what kind of absolute shit-tier, bottom of the barrel Skill was this that it would *literally* disable its user when it got strong enough?!

Hold on, maybe that wasn't the case? There were probably some more fine-tuned controls. I mean, there was no way the System was *that* poorly designed! But what kind of porno protagonist would level something that didn't help you get laid? Was this thing even properly

tested? Remembering how I abused [Tinker], I was pretty sure I already knew the answer. But it was still worth a shot.

I reached into my mind once again, looking past the sensations flooding it, trying to find a metaphorical knob or dial that would… aha! I quickly activated my Intelligence attribute and let it guide my thoughts over to exactly what I was looking for. I quickly activated it.

Immediately, the force of the mental assault began to subside, and I was left with only a light feeling. It still wasn't what I'd call "comfortable," but it was something. Think getting constantly kicked in the shins by a toddler versus being viciously beaten by a gang of crowbar-wielding MMA fighters. So yeah, I really couldn't complain.

"Alright, two hours before the dropoff, so let's see how much I can level up [Detect Cheating]," I whispered to myself as I began skating around the rink.

Detect Cheating (lv 15) **Target** Jane **Method** at roller rink while partner is distracted **Victim** Stevens
Detect Cheating (lv 15) **Target** Hawthorne **Method** ndezvous at roller rink **Victim** Nicholson
Detect Cheating (lv 15) **Target** Doyle **Method** at roller rink while partner is distracted **Victim** ane
Detect Cheating (lv 15) **Target** n Clarke **Method** at roller rink while partner is distracted **Victim** enkins
Detect Cheating (lv 15) **Target** Burns **Method** ndezvous at roller rink **Victim** Jackson

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 15 -> 16]

Five quick uses of [Detect Cheating] got me 5 perfect hits, all thanks to the passive for pointing the way! But only a single level up. What was the deal with that?! Hold on, the System gave additional experience *after* I actually did something with the information, even if it was just telling someone about it. So how about if I did just that?

Seeing an interesting little repeat in the tables, I made my way over to the man named Josh Lane with a mischievous grin.

“Hey, Josh?” I asked.

“The hell do you want? Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“With your girlfriend?” I asked with crossed eyebrows.

“Uh… who are you?”

“Oh no wait, that’s her there flirting with another man!”

“Wait, what?!” shouted Josh, riding off towards his girlfriend. “What the fuck, Kade?!”

I snickered to myself as I made my way towards my next source of experience. “*Sorry dude, but call it a service to your country.*”

He was pretty close by.

“Hey Louie,” I said to the next victim, taking some time to find him. “Who’s that guy Morgan’s with?”

“Oh by Ultarian! Morgan, Morgan! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 16 -> 17]

Sweet! Another level up! Though I did feel a *little* bad for the man…

Detect Cheating (lv 17)
Target Jenkins
Method Rendezvous at roller rink
Victim Bright

Ok, maybe not that bad. He was just as guilty. He deserved it.

But what was up with getting a level up so soon after the previous one? Did the passive grant some kind of an experience boost? Or maybe going after romantic cheaters somehow got me more experience. It went against what the scholarly article said about how experience works, in that it added a raw bonus when the amount of sex a Skill caused was negative. But the sex I was preventing was getting me even *more* experience! The book might have gotten it wrong, and it just multiplied it by negative one instead… or something.

I let out a cough and continued. I could think about this later, onto the next asshole.

Chapter 59: Cheaters get Stitches… or something

“Hey Sarah, take a look at what Mellissa there’s up to!”

“What the hell?!”

I nodded and skated over to the next set.

“Yo Jake, Brittney looks pretty comfortable over there. Do you maybe want to let her know how you’re feeling?”

“Oh come on!”

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 17 -> 18]

That was how my evening was going. At a roller rink and catching cheaters was the best way to level up [Detect Cheating] I’d found so far, and I was wondering why I didn’t start doing this before? Well, besides the fact that the Skill’s passive form would’ve left me a gibbering mess on the ground if I hadn’t found the secret mental dial to lessen its effects.

But now that I had, I was able to use it while still functioning! The passive ability would point me towards any guilty parties by letting me feel their negative emotions, and then the active ability would give me their and their victim’s names. Then it was a matter of scanning enough people that I would eventually run into the victims.

Of course, it still took a bit of time to get all of the names I needed, and there were still plenty of people whose partners weren’t here with them. But I was writing all of the names down, and my 19 Intelligence helped me keep track of who was where.

After a quick break and another scanning session, I made my way to the next few people to tattle on.

“Cut the make out session asshole, your girlfriend’s getting railed by another guy! Do you want to do something about it?”

“Aww man! That’s *my* girl!”

With a grimace, I watched the latest man run off to protect what he believed to be *his*. *"What a fucking hypocrite,"* I thought to myself. *"I could feel his reaction to my words from this Skill. It fucking hurt, didn't it? That's what 'your girl' is going to be feeling too once* she *finds out about* you *next."*

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 18 -> 19]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge 7 -> 8]

Hmm, still no new perks. Whatever, the night was still young and I still had another half an hour until the dead drop. I'd just keep grinding until I got something, which judging by how often I've been getting, wasn't going to be long. Besides, it was fun making these people squirm!

I slowly made my way to a corner to settle down while I ran another round of pings. The lights began to darken and the disco ball turned the shade of lightened blood. It was apparently the "couple's dance." I didn't care, I simply stood hunched over my notepad, scribbling down the names and victims of the next batch of cheaters. It was surprising how many of these idiots brought their partners with them here while using the roller rink as a rendezvous. But what else could be expected from *them*.

"Hey buddy, you the one telling everyone about us?" came an angry voice from in front of me.

I looked up to see a small group of men, all the self-righteous types, looking down on me with their arms crossed.

"Telling *what* about you?" I spat back.

"That we're cheating on our partners! Do you have some kind of a problem?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," I slowly replied, straightening out my back to stare the apparent ring leader in the eye. "You planning to do something about it, limp-dicks?" I relished in how they squirmed at the mild insult.

I saw the sucker punch coming from a mile away. Even with roller

skates on, I ducked out of the way and delivered a focused blow to the man's jaw. 16 Strength made it hit hard, pushing the ringleader back and into the arms of another man behind him. Of course, that wasn't enough to stop things. Why would a single punch ever be?

Another pair of skaters charged at me next, and I simply slid back a step until my back was touching the wall. Without any control of their bodies at those speeds, they collided with each other. And then the next challenger stepped forward, and became the next victim. And the one after that.

The entire group wisened up and took me on all at once. 16 Strength let me throw them to the floor with my blows, 19 Constitution let me take the occasional punch to the face or kick to the gut with barely a flinch, and 16 Endurance let me keep going when the others had tired. As my fists flew, I could feel something else beyond my own rage guiding them. My hatred, anger, desire to make these people suffer.

These bastards wanted to pick a fight with me?! I'd show them what happened! I'd make sure they learned never to do something so stupid ever again! Maybe they'd learn never to cheat on their partners again too? But I was being too optimistic. They were scum! All that lust, that jealousy. I could feel it, it was inside of me! I loathed it, I loathed them! I loathed…

[Skill Level Up! Revenge 8 -> 9]

"Hey, hey! Knock it off! What the hell is going on?" shouted a short, balding man in a tucked in polo shirt as he made his way towards the fight.

"This asshole's been ruining everyone's night by telling everyone we're cheaters!" shouted the ringleader, taking a large step away from me.

"I just told their partners they were being cheated on," I replied. "And I was just minding my own business here when *all* of them picked a fight with me! I'm just defending myself!"

"I don't care, get out!" shouted the man. I could see his nametag said

“manager.”

“Yeah, get the hell out of here,” I barked at the men who’d attacked me. “Nobody wants you!”

“No, I mean *you*,” said the manager, pointing towards me. “Take those skates off and get out of my rink.”

“What?! *They* threw the first punch! I was just defending myself!”

“I don’t care, you’re ruining people’s nights, and I can’t have that in my place of business. So get your snitching ass out of here!”

I paused and looked at the man. Pathetic, slimy, he was as bad as the rest of them. I raised my first and he flinched, fear ever present in his eyes. I looked at them like a predator, and all I could say was that he was pitiful. It wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Yeah, I’m leaving,” I grumbled, taking off my skates and shuffling my way out of the roller rink.

Outside, I took a deep breath of cold, smoggy air. The sharp chill did well to freeze the rage simmering just under my skin. It wasn’t gone, but it was mellowed. Though to be honest, it wouldn’t take much to bring it back out.

I idly looked down to the notepad I was carrying, the one that still listed the names and victims of all of the people I wasn’t able to directly confront because they had the sense of leaving their partners at home.

But in front of me was a payphone, and I had plenty of spare change.

The smoldering flame just received some new kindling.

Opening up the phone book, I found the name of the first victim I’d jotted down, and it didn’t take long for them to pick up.

“…yes? Hello?” asked a meek sounding woman through the receiver.

“Yeah, Jennifer Gardley?” I asked back. Apparently [Detect Cheating] didn’t work through the phone, judging by the lack of an info menu

in front of me. I didn't want to take any risk and tell the wrong person in case the System didn't count it towards a level up.

"Yes, that's me. Who is this?" she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"That doesn't matter. Your boyfriend's cheating on you with some skank here at the roller rink."

"…"

"Hey, you there? You should tell him to pound sand or something. Total stuck up prick." I couldn't tell what the woman was thinking. For the first time that night, I couldn't feel anything other than my own thoughts.

"Hu-" came a squeak. And then a sniffle. "Aauu!" And finally a sob. With many more that followed.

I didn't need [Detect Cheating]'s passive to tell me how she felt. As I stood there in the dark, illuminated only by a streetlight, the world around me felt so small. I half expected the Skill to still activate and fill me with feelings of desolation and hatred. But nothing came. I was alone in my thoughts.

And the only sensation that filled me was one of guilt.

[Skill Level Up! Revenge 9 -> 10]

[Revenge Perk Obtained! Vengeful Force]

And I finally understood why. I was returning to my old self.

My mind fazed out of reality and threw itself back to a time long gone, a time I buried deep down in my psyche.

I saw a girl, a high school Junior, 17 years old and in her third year. Just like I was at the time. My girlfriend. I saw her making out with another guy, a man I called my best friend. That day I lost two people dear to me. They weren't the last.

"It's just high school, you'll get over it. Now just focusing on

studying," said my dad.

"It's your fault for taking a schoolyard romance so seriously. Grow up," said my mom.

"It's normal to grow out of these kinds of relationships. Don't worry, you got into a great school, your life is only about to begin!" exclaimed my school's guidance counselor.

Why isn't anyone taking me seriously? Even one, just one person! I don't know what kind of miserable or carefree lives they live that they think what happened to me is normal, but losing the two closest people to me in one fell swoop… there's a hole inside me nobody wants to notice. Maybe I'll make them see it!

"What, suspended?! For picking a fight?" shouted my dad. "You'd better count yourself lucky this doesn't end up on any kind of record, otherwise your college might kick you out!"

"Don't you think you're a little too young to be a wine mom?" laughed my mom. "Seriously sweetie, leave the booze to grown ups with *real* problems!"

I only acted out as some desperate call for help, but that was because my real calls were ignored. And that desperation and trauma only followed me as I started on my downward spiral, eventually leading me to rock bottom.

From there, I found the light and after taking only two steps towards it, I found myself in this world. A world that existed solely as a constant reminder of my worst nightmare made manifest.

…

"Oh why?! Why did he do this to me?" came the voice of Jennifer from the phone, snapping me back to the present.

"Jennifer?" I spoke softly into the receiver.

"We were even planning to get married in Otroka! Did I do something wrong? Why is this happening?!"

“Jennifer,” I said more sternly, but without any harshness in my voice. “This is *not* your fault. You got unlucky and ended up with someone who doesn’t love you the same way you loved him.”

“Huh?” Her sobbing began to slow, now replaced with only a few sniffles.

“I can tell from your reaction alone that you are a wonderful and caring person, who deserves someone who’ll truly love you with all their heart. Apparently, the man you were dating isn’t him. You’re allowed to feel horrible about this, anyone does when their long-time partner betrays their trust like that.”

“Yeah, but… he was going to propose to me!”

“I’m sorry, Jennifer. I really am, I’ve been through the same. But I can tell you that it gets better. It’ll hurt today, and tomorrow. It might hurt a week from now. But soon, the pain will fade and you can move on, stronger than ever. Use that strength to find someone who won’t betray you like this.”

“I don’t know if I can…”

“You’re already strong, Jennifer. It takes strength to care. I know you can pull through.” Come on System, show me what 22 goddamn Charisma could do!

“Y-you’re right. I am strong, I can find someone better! Thank you.” She hung up.

“…you’re welcome.”

[Level up! (11)]

[Str: +2 | Con: +1 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +1 | Int: +1]

[Str: 18 | Con: 20 | End: 17 | Cha: 23 | Atr: 13 | Dex: 15 | Int: 20]

[Skill Level Up! Detect Cheating 19 -> 20]

[Detect Cheating Perk Obtained! Detailed Information]

And no level up for [Revenge].

Chapter 60: Wild Goose Chase

I hung up the phone with a tired hand. While my body shook with exhaustion, a content smile stood on my face.

Digging up those old memories wasn't easy, and I didn't want to face it, thinking they were over. But that obviously wasn't the case. The same rage that threw me into a downward spiral back home… was about to happen again. And I stopped it. I stopped it!

Things were looking up, and I had everything I came here for. Enough levels in [Detect Cheating] and a new perk to hopefully get more dirt on the traitor, an unexpectedly new outlook on life, and… that was it. It should've been everything, but I had the feeling I was forgetting something.

I took a deep breath of the cool, smog-laden night-time air and began to trudge back to my car. I walked past the roller rink again, half expecting someone to jump out and heckle me, but those fears were unfounded. The other half of my expectations were for a knot to form in my stomach, be it from awkwardness or sheer tension of passing by that troublesome place again. But the sensation didn't come either. I really did feel… free.

But to be honest, I was just caught up in the moment. A loud nearby grumble snapped me out of my inner peace, and as I turned to face the source, my eyes widened in realization.

A man who looked to be in his thirties tightly held onto a briefcase before carelessly throwing it underneath the seats of the bus stop. It slid beyond the plastic bench, past the metal poles that held up the plexiglass roof over the seating, and all the way to the beginning of the black asphalt road.

"Seriously, I can't believe they're making me do overtime like this, and I ain't even getting paid extra!"

The placid waters within me experienced a ripple as I began piecing together the man's words. As everything fell into place and I finally remembered the *other* reason I came here, those ripples turned into

hemorrhaging rapids as red filled my eyes.

I was sure the sounds of my footsteps weren't that loud, since I wasn't stamping my feet, but the strange man looked my way and began running with a scream before I was even halfway towards him.

"Strength, Dexterity, do your thing," I whispered to myself as I reached into my mind and activated the two attributes, letting them enhance my legs until they were on-par with an olympic sprinter.

It didn't take very long before I caught up to the stranger. With a flying leap, I closed the rest of the distance and wrapped both of my arms around his waist in a grabbing tackle, bringing us both to the ground with me on top.

I was already up on my knees before he could even register what had happened. One hand around his wrist and a heavy tug was enough to turn him around so that he was facing up towards me instead of the ground.

The man's face was contorted into a familiar look. His eyes were wide, and mouth was twitching in a mumble-shout trying to sound off something between a plea and a cry.

Plea? What the hell did *he* want after trying to ruin Goldshank's business? My haven?! I was going to make him *pay for-*

I managed to trace his wild eyes to my right hand, which was curled into a raised fist. Oh…

The raging waters within me suddenly went calm, but in a wave of ice that left everything frozen solid so suddenly it was nauseating.

I sat there frozen for another few seconds. My head turned towards the raised fist, and I slowly lowered it with a drawn out sigh.

"So it really is going to take some work, huh?" I said.

"W-what?!"

"Not talking about you." My head swiveled over to the man on the ground and I gave him an unsteady look, as if my mouth wanted to

give an apologetic smile while my eyebrows were still angry. The end result made the man under me squirm even harder. “But I still have a job to do, so maybe I *am* talking about you?”

“For fuck’s sake, why do I always have to deal with the crazies?”

I raised a finger but stopped partway before lowering it. “Yeah, fair. But just tell me who you work for and I’ll let you go.”

“I don’t know, I swear! I was just told to pick up some packages and move them around, and there’s usually cash sitting somewhere when I’m done.”

“Told by who?” I impatiently tapped a finger on his shoulder.

“Dunno! It’s someone different each time!”

I took in a deep breath and slowly let it out, a complete contrast from the short and frantic pace of the man below me.

“I-I can show you where I’m supposed to be meeting them next! I still have more packages to pick up and drop around town!”

The residual anger within me demanded I slam a fist into the man’s head for giving me more work, but the only place I put it was my pocket. That made it harder to stand up when I was using only one hand for balance, especially when I was already on an uneven surface, but I was able to get to my feet before he could run away. My other hand was on his shoulder as soon as he was about to.

“Hey hey! No need to still keep your hands on me, I’m not going to run!”

“Good, because we both know what would happen if you tried.” I slowly lifted my hand and placed it in my other pocket. In any other circumstance I wouldn’t have been so confident in my threat, but I was pretty confident about [Intimidation].

And for a good reason as the man stood in place. His feet didn’t budge one inch, even though the rest of his body began shaking.

“So what are you waiting for? Lead the way.”

“Alright, over here,” said the nervous man. His shakes settled down to a more restrained fear in the fifteen minutes it took us to walk here. “I’m supposed to pick up another couple of packages in thirty minutes. So can I go now?”

“Not until I meet your boss,” I said.

No sooner than when the words left my mouth, I saw another man walking towards the pickup spot. Just like last time, he let out some grumbles before tossing a stack of packages into a payphone and walking away.

“Alright, you’re free to go,” I said to the man next to me and began to follow this new one.

I was able to close about half the distance between us before he noticed me and began to increase his pace. It didn’t take long before he figured what was up and broke into a dead sprint.

“Hey, get back here!” I shouted while channeling my physical attributes into my legs to close the distance.

The man let out a pained grunt as I tackled him to the ground and grabbed at his shoulder.

“Alright, who told you to move these packages around?” I asked, my voice much more calm and amicable than last time.

“I-I- I can’t say! Please, let me go! I beg you! I’ll get into so much trouble if I don’t finish this run!”

“You’re already in trouble. The contents of those packages are letting people cheat in a massive national poker tournament.”

“What?! I swear I didn’t know that!” the man continued to stammer. “Please, I’ll tell you everything I know, I don’t belong in jail!”

My eyebrows rose in surprise. This guy was much easier to deal with than the last, almost as if they had completely different alignments.

“I just answered an ad from the paper, I didn’t know they were

having me do something illegal! Come on, you've got to believe me!"

He reeked of desperation. And judging from his build and demeanor, he definitely didn't come off as some kind of hardcore career criminal. He really did look like he was unknowingly dragged into this. But the cheating ring I was dealing with at work was much too complex to be run by a couple of nobodies, so I wasn't entirely convinced. But it didn't feel good being so hard on this guy.

"Alright, don't worry. I'm just trying to figure out who's in charge, so tell me who your boss is and you should get out of this scott free."

"Really? Oh, thank you, thank you! But… I really don't know who the boss is. I was just handed a letter by another employee along with these packages and told to bring them to different parts around town."

My eyelid twitched.

"B-but I could show you where I'm supposed to pick up the next batch! Yeah! It's just down the street!"

"…lead the way."

"Stop right there!" I shouted at the third illicit courier of the night as I tackled her to the ground.

She reached for a whistle around her neck but I smacked it out of her hand before she could put it to her mouth.

"Hold up, *you're* the criminal here!"

"What?!" she said, more scared than confused.

I quickly got up, feeling more uncomfortable and ashamed at myself right now than I ever had since coming to this world. For a criminal courier, she was making me feel like I really did chase down and tackle a woman walking alone in the city in the middle of the night. And not to mention her whistle…

"Oh my god, you really *are* all innocent."

The woman simply reached for her whistle again.

“Wait, please!” I shouted, making her stop for an instant. “Those packages are being used to cheat in a massive poker tournament! I’m just trying to figure out who’s actually in charge of the cheating ring!”

“For real? Dammit!” the woman shouted as she slowly rose to her feet and walked over to the dropped box. She tore it open, letting loose a nasty odor that reminded me of rotting papier mache. Inside was a radio headset and a case of counterfeit chips. “And I thought I finally scored a good job, what the hell?!”

“Hey, I’m sorry about all of this.” I gave the woman a sympathetic look. “But if you tell me who your boss is, I can at least get them to face justice.”

“I wish I knew, but I’ve been picking these packages up from dead drops, and all I have to go with is the next stop.”

“Heh. Heheh. Ha! Hahaha!” I let loose a cacophonous laugh that echoed out into the night. “I’m never getting to the end of this wild goose chase, am I?”

“Is that what you’re doing?” came the voice of a man from behind me. “I could’ve sworn you were up to something else with how you tackled this young woman in the middle of the night.”

I quickly turned around, trying not to show the red covering half my face.

“Hey Mike, long time no see.”

“Sam? Is that you?”

“The one and only!”

I barely recognized the man in front of me. His snark and smile were the only features I recognized; everything else about him had changed. His chin was cleanly shaved and hair trimmed into a neat crew cut. The brown leather coat was a far cry from the old, hole-ridden wool one he used to wear when he still slept on the streets.

And the presence he held himself with was probably the biggest change out of them all. This was a man rebuilt.

“So how’s life been treating you? Word on the street is that you’ve been doing well for Goldshanks, catching cheaters left and right. Glad you took my words to heart and went with him!”

“You have no idea how right you were,” I said with a tired laugh. “But you didn’t say anything about overtime.”

“Is that what you’re doing now? I told you the work would be honest, not easy. But… your work doesn’t exactly *look* honest from where I’m standing.”

My eyes darted between him and the woman, now panting while standing over the broken contents of the package. “I swear it’s not what it looks like.”

“Don’t worry, I know you’re not that kind of guy. So, what really is going on?”

“There’s an organized cheating ring, but they’re all being supplied by dead drops. I’ve been chasing after it for the last hour or so, but I haven’t gotten anywhere.”

“Hmm, sounds like a wild goose chase, alright.” He clapped his hands together, bringing mine and the woman’s attention to him. “Tell you what? I still owe you for getting me this job, so let me help you out with this!”

“I didn’t get you your job, you were just next to me at the right time.”

“Same thing, if you hadn’t caused that ruckus back then and attracted Kozakhov’s talent scout, she wouldn’t have noticed me and given me control of his street network!”

“Still, I owe *you* for telling me about Goldshanks.”

“Whatever, I’m still doing this for you.” Sam flashed me a confident smile. “Just tell me where the next dead drop is and I’ll have someone scout it out, and branch out from there. I’ll get you the info

as soon as I can track it back to whoever's in charge."

"Sam… you're a lifesaver, you know that? Seriously, thank you."

"Don't mention it! Besides, a rival gang is bad business for my boss, so I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

I said one more round of thanks and goodbyes, and headed back home. It was pretty late into the night, and I needed my sleep for tomorrow. I was feeling more confident about things thanks to Sam, but that wouldn't stop all of the cheaters I'd have to deal with tomorrow. And besides, I still had to deal with the traitor.

Chapter 61: Of Sus and Sufferance

The next morning, I didn't want to leave my bed. I had no clue why. Everything was going pretty well; I had a friend helping me with investigating the source of the cheating, Ultarian Festival Week was likely going to start winding down which meant less unsanitary conditions at my first job, and I'd gotten a new perk in [Detect Cheating] which would make my life a lot easier.

Maybe it was the idea that I had to interact with a traitor which kept me frozen in place under my warm covers. I'd already committed to being as passive as possible with him, and just collecting information. That wouldn't bring any trouble my way. Yeah. But why did I still feel so anxious about today?

Eventually, the sound from my alarm grew so annoying that even if I did give up and go back to bed, I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep.

"Fine," I grumbled to myself as I hit the off button and headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day.

A quick shower and teeth brushing later, and I was out the door with my tool case headed towards my first job.

[Skill Level Up! Tinker lv 11 -> 12]

Hmm, only a single level up. To be fair, I didn't have to do as much "dirty" work today as I had this past week, so it really wasn't that bad of a power up.

After heading back to my apartment to drop off my tools and wash my hands very thoroughly, I got in my car and headed to Goldshanks' casino for the tournament semifinals.

I got there forty five minutes early. The casino looked the same as yesterday, with the smaller grouping of tables in the center and expanded bleachers for the audience lining the left-side walls. The stands were already starting to fill up, no doubt for the action the penultimate day promised.

While most of the other casino staff were patrolling the play area for cheating devices, I made my way to something much more important.

A new day, a new catering table. And just like yesterday, it was filled to the brim with the best foods Mr. Goldshanks' money could buy! But unlike yesterday, the bagel sandwich I piled for myself didn't have any suspicious ingredients. Plain cream cheese, tomatoes, salmon-

"Hey Mike," came a sharp, yet non-hostile voice from behind me.

After all the trouble I faced yesterday with getting my sandwich into my mouth, I was ready to ignore the woman behind me and begin eating. But I recognized who it was. And if she wasn't here to pick a fight, I'd eat another gorgonzola toilet bomb.

“You talked to Beatrice yesterday,” Kamila began. Her eyes were sharp, but the focused edge they normally sported wasn’t aimed directly at me. “She told me about it.”

“Oh yeah,” I said with a nod. “She’s nice.”

“Looks like you’re not interested in making smalltalk either, so let me just get to the point. She vouched for you.” Kamila looked into my eyes. “She’s got a sharp eye for judging peoples’ characters, and it let her avoid a lot of trouble at her previous jobs.”

“But trouble still found her.”

“It finds all of us, that’s why we came here. And her judgment of character was what led her here, to Mr. Goldshanks. That's also why she trusts you. So as hard as it is for me to admit, if she says you’re good, then I think there’s merit to it.”

My mouth automatically curled into a smile, but I had to fight back my eyes to keep it from turning my expression into a sneer. That feeling of smugness lasted only for just a second thankfully, and it was soon overwhelmed by a genuine softness. “Thank you,” I said in a soft whisper.

“I don’t think we’re going to be fast friends, though,” Kamila said with a shrug. “And I’m still going to keep an eye on you because of that stunt you pulled on your first day here.”

My eyes lost a touch of their previous glow, but my voice held strong and steady. “I understand, I’m just glad you’re giving me a sincere second chance. The day we met, something else was speaking through my lips. Something not human; it’s really hard to explain. But as soon as I realized what was going on, I shut it up. And I’ll make sure it stays that way while I’m in these walls or talking to any of the others. Or anyone else innocent.”

“I don’t really understand what you’re trying to say, but you sound like you mean it, which is more than I can say for most peoples’ excuses. I still expect you to keep to that promise.”

“I will.” The fire was back, and I knew Kamila saw it when her lips twitched upwards.

“But it’s still going to take another two months for me to really see if that’s the case, so don’t think you’ve gotten off scot free just yet.”

“I don’t. But even if we can’t be friends, could we at least be a bit more cordial towards each other?”

“I already am,” she said with a slightly confused look.

I opened my mouth for a second, but decided not to push it further. She really was being nicer to me than before. And even if I wasn’t on the same level as one of her gal pals, it was good enough.

When the ensuing silence between us went on for several seconds, I gave her a curt nod and made my leave.

I got several feet before bumping into another employee. Or rather, he walked into me and made me drop my sandwich over his shirt.

“Gah! What the hell, Mike?!” shouted Todd, the head of security. He tried to wipe off the slices of tomato and deli meats off his shirt, while wiping away the bits of mustard with a handkerchief. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Oh shit, sorry!” I quickly shouted while trying to help him out. My apologetic tone quickly dried up as I registered his words and tone. “But you’re the one who bumped into me, you should be careful too.”

There was a flash of red in Todd’s eyes, and it wasn’t just the fact that they were bloodshot. His lips curled into a snarl and eyebrows narrowed downward as his mouth opened to reveal a row of clenched teeth. But before he could say a word, he let out a drawn out breath and mumbled something.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I said sorry,” said Todd, now only barely audible. “I’ve been up all night, a lot of work with packages.”

I nodded in response. “Yeah, I get you. I’ve been running around on a wild goose chase myself, but I got some help partway through, so it probably wasn’t as bad as yours.” I figured the security manager was also running after the cheater, and by his attitude, he probably couldn’t catch them either.

“Yeah,” Todd said with a nod while trying to put his handkerchief away in his pocket. It got stuck however and he tried to roughly shove it in, his hand looking more like a chicken pecking the ground at how he kept shoving it up and down while in his sleepy state. In fact, he ended up grabbing at the contents in his pocket and accidentally pulling it out.

My hand reflexively shot out and grabbed the small tube that began to fall. Too hard, apparently, as the cap slipped off and a bit of the sticky contents fell onto my hand.

“Make sure to wash that off before today’s matches start, the stuff stinks.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I said as I absentmindedly lifted my hand to my nose to give it a quick sniff.

I reeled my head back as the strong scent hit me. And then something bigger hit me: the smell was familiar. Very familiar. From last night in fact, it was the same smell that was on all of the packages.

“Hey Todd,” I began. “What is this stuff anyway?”

“It’s glue. What of it?”

I looked over to the tube’s label and saw that it was specifically

advertised to work with cardboard boxes. “Why do you bring a tube of glue with you to work?”

“It’s from last night,” Todd said with a shrug. “You know, with the boxes?”

I looked right at him and asked, “And what were you doing spending all night sealing up packages when you’ve got a big day at the tournament today?”

A flash of anger went through Todd, but I could’ve sworn the fire turned into ice-cold fear for a moment. It was gone as soon as it appeared though, and he was left sounding annoyed. “I don’t see the need to worry when you’ve been responsible for catching all of the cheaters, it shouldn’t make a difference.” He gave me a quick smile.

I didn’t budge and kept staring at him, silently demanding an actual answer.

“I was sending out early Christmas presents to my family,” he said, turning around and walking out towards the back rooms to his office.

“It’s August,” I said as Todd walked out of earshot.

I wanted to push him further, confront him and bring everyone together for this while digging into his story. But… I didn’t want to betray Kamila’s trust if I was wrong about this. She said that everyone came to work for Goldshanks to escape the worst aspects of

this world. They were all the same as me, we were supposed to be brothers and sisters in shared suffering, I wasn't going to betray that bond! But at the same time, the evidence was mounting. And so was the fire in my own veins.

Chapter 62: Confrontation

Todd.

I stared at the man as he walked through the door to the back of the casino, presumably towards the security room. I felt my legs itch as they begged me to pursue him, but I knew confronting him was a risk that would not be worth it. At least as things were. I didn't want to bring the wrath of the other employees down on me by accusing another victim of this cruel world that he was a traitor.

If anything, he could've been on the goose chase just like me, and the box glue he had was likely the spoils of finding a higher up in the cheaters' chain of command! I was trying to convince myself that he truly was innocent, but I knew I was lying to myself.

I was stuck between two raging emotions, fear and anger, and couldn't move. I was ready to give up for now and head back to the catering table for another sandwich, when I was broken out of my stupor by a massive hand falling on my shoulder.

"Hey Mike, there's this homeless man outside looking for you," said one of the bouncers. "I sent him away though."

I turned around and looked at the large man in confusion for a moment before my eyes lit up. "Sam! Which way did he go?" I said in a flurry of words.

"Easy there, he said he was just here to deliver this to you," said the bouncer as he handed me an envelope.

"Thanks," I said as I opened it up and slowly slid out its contents.

It was a black and white picture with a note written at the top. The note simply read, "found your culprit." The picture was a very clean shot of a very familiar man handing a stack of packages to somebody else.

The image crumpled in my sudden harsh grip.

"Hey," I began.

“What is it, Mike?” asked the bouncer.

“Call Goldshanks and the police over, I found our spy.” I turned around and began to walk towards the back, before turning into a jog and then breaking out into a sprint.

The bouncer took a few seconds to register what I’d said before pulling up his radio and saying something urgent into it. By the time he’d done so, I was too far away to hear anything other than the walkie-talkie’s static.

I barged into the back rooms, shoving the door hard enough to have it almost fly off its hinges into the wall and leave a crack. I was ready to raise my foot and kick down the door of the security room, but before I could make it there, Todd beat me to the punch and ran out, heading for the emergency exit.

“Todd!” I shouted, running after him outside and into the early morning sunlight.

The man didn’t bother to reply, and just kept panting as he tried to get away from me.

Futile.

I closed the distance between us in four long steps and grabbed him by the back of his neck, but it was slick from an excess of hair grease that had dribbled down, and he squeezed out of my grasp.

But rather than continue running, Todd screamed at the physical contact and tried to throw a punch at me.

I looked at him unblinkingly as I only felt a numb tingling where his fist had landed on my cheek. And I barely even realized he had doubled over, knees falling to the ground with his hand clutching his chest, with my own fist planted firmly in his stomach.

Adrenaline blurred through my veins. It forced my mind to move at a million miles an hour, yet it was entirely dedicated to processing a wellspring of emotions, barely having any power to spare for a proper reply. All I could sputter out was a single soft word.

“Why?”

“W-why?” repeated Todd in a hoarse voice, followed by a cough.

“Why’d you do it?” I asked, my face frozen in an expressionless stupor. “After everything Goldshanks has given us, why’d you do it?”

“B-because,” Todd sputtered, but said with a sinister grin. “They promised me everything I ever wanted. A position of *real* power, w-where I can finally be the one everyone will fear instead of the other way around!”

“Is that worth throwing away everything you already have?!” I shouted, finally regaining proper control of my vocal chords. “It’s a shit system, and even after all the suffering it’s obviously brought you, you want to jump back in it?! Wouldn’t you rather end it?”

Fear flashed through Todd’s eyes, but I could see he registered my words by the look of disgust on his face at my last sentence. “I *deserve* this!” He shouted back at me. “It’s only fair I get to be on the other side!”

I began to sag forwards as all of the muscles in my body went slack. I slowly lifted my head until I was staring right at Todd. I didn’t know what he saw, but the indignation he showed me earlier completely shriveled as we made eye contact. The entire neighborhood, the noisy urban playpen, went entirely silent in that moment save for a few police sirens in the distance.

“Oh, you definitely deserve this, all right.”

Todd didn’t even acknowledge me. He just reached into his pants and began to whip out a pistol.

I didn’t let him get any further.

Before he could point the weapon at me, I grabbed him by the wrist and squeezed. I heard a crack, and a scream, and he dropped the gun. I let go for a moment, ready to block or react to a counter punch or kick, but he ran instead.

Todd didn’t get two steps before I spun him around, and landed a

punch on the right side of his chest. I could've sworn I heard ribs breaking, and he was about to collapse. He didn't get the chance to fall on his own, as I sent my other fist flying into his cheek. Blood and teeth flew out of his mouth, but some of that blood could have very well been from the first blow.

He somehow hit the ground chest first, the previous blow sending him into a spin that managed to let his head touch down gently compared to the rest of him. I didn't stop and walked over to him and raised my foot.

As soon as Todd got his bearings, his fear returned as he saw what I was about to do. "Please, no, stop!" he weakly pleaded.

Maybe I'd show him *some* mercy and aim for something not vital like his knee, or his crotch? Though with the kinds of people who lived in this shithole, that was pretty vital. Remembering that people like Todd weren't exactly a rare breed here threw a metaphorical can of gasoline onto my already burning rage, turning it into a blazing inferno.

Before I could stomp on the worm below me, I heard a series of shouts from nearby that snapped me back to reality.

"Freeze! Step back from him and get on the ground!" said the voice.

I turned over to see a pair of uniformed police officers aiming their guns at me, and perfectly complied with their first demand.

"Now get back from the man!"

I did as requested and slowly took several steps back.

One of the officers then holstered his gun and reached for a radio, mumbling something into it about getting an ambulance before rushing over to Todd..

"Now on the ground!" shouted the other officer.

"He had a gun, he tried to shoot me!" I shouted back, looking towards the downed worm and his weapon lying on the ground.

The officer headed towards Todd hesitated a moment before following my eyes and rushing over to the weapon first.

“I said, on the ground!” the second officer shouted again.

I didn’t immediately comply due to the gun’s proximity to the man who’d attacked me, worried that he might somehow get up enough to grab it and fire a shot at me, but the officers didn’t like that. Before either of us could make a decision on what to do next, a new voice came out from behind me.

“That won’t be necessary, officers, he’s one of mine,” said Goldshanks. “The one on the floor, however…”

At that moment Todd opened his eyes and lifted his head towards Goldshanks, but only did just that.

“Take him. He belongs to the streets.”

Todd’s head fell back onto the pavement and he let out a pained groan.

The first officer grabbed the gun with a handkerchief and carried it back to the other one. An ambulance’s wail became audible in the background and soon pulled into the lot. A pair of paramedics came out with a stretcher, carefully moved Todd into it, and brought him back into the emergency vehicle before driving away.

The police officers nodded at us and the second one spoke, “We’ll keep someone on him and bring him over to the jail once he’s recovered. Who knows when that’ll be, though.”

Goldshanks simply nodded, and the officers turned around to leave. The two of us did the same after my boss motioned me back inside. The short walk was silent, and he only spoke once we were through the doors.

“So it was Todd, all along.” It wasn’t a question.

I merely nodded to acknowledge the words.

“Truth be told, I knew Todd wasn’t the same as the rest of us,” said

Goldshanks after a long moment. “I just saw his pain and gave him a safe place from all of that. He was free to leave any time.”

I slowly turned towards my boss.

“But I didn’t expect him to sell me out like that. No good deed goes unpunished, right?”

I let out a sigh of my own. “No sir, it does not.”

“I overheard some of your conversation with him, even if it was mostly mumbles, but I didn’t catch who he sold me out to.”

“I might not have exactly given him a chance to say after he pulled a gun on me,” I replied sheepishly.

“Well, we can always ask him at the hospital once he wakes up. Maybe we can dangle a more lenient sentence in front of him if he complies?”

“Aren’t the sentences for cheating already lenient?”

“I wouldn’t consider attempted murder to be in the same realm as cheating at a card game, even one with a million dollars on the line.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, somehow having forgotten that very important detail.

“I don’t know what kind of boss I’d be if I didn’t let an employee take the rest of the day off if he had a gun pulled on him. So how about if you come back tomorrow? I’d give you the whole week off, but we’ve still got the tournament.”

The adrenaline was beginning to fade, and I was tired. Before I could open my mouth to reply however, I caught sight of the *real* traitor. The high ranking military officer my Skill identified as selling off state secrets.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay,” I said. “But I’ll take it easy for a bit, if that’s fine.”

Goldshanks looked at me carefully, then nodded before walking

away.

For a moment, I was alone in the back of the casino. The heavy doors leading to the front kept out all the noise from the crowd getting ready, giving me a moment to process everything that had happened.

After Todd pulled the gun on me, I lost it. I didn't feel bad for what I did to him after that, at least until he was on the floor, but even before the turning point, I'd felt like I was losing myself. I was incandescent. But then once he was disarmed, entirely at my mercy, *begging me*… I was ready to kill him.

"So much for controlling my anger," I said with a shameful frown.

[Level Up!]

[Str: +2 | Con: +1 | End: +1 | Cha: +1 | Atr: +0 | Dex: +0 | Int: +2]

[Str: 20 | Con: 21 | End: 18 | Cha: 24 | Atr: 13 | Dex: 15 | Int: 22]

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness 8 -> 9]

[Skill Level Up! Revenge 10 -> 11]

Chapter 63: The Old Intel Switcheroo

“Hey,” came a sharp voice as I walked back to the casino floor.

I looked over and saw Kamila walking towards me with her apparently “friendly” scowl.

“I heard a lot of commotion outside and saw the police and an ambulance drive into the back. Beatrice told me Todd was the traitor, but didn’t get much more,” said my co-worker. While she didn’t ask a question, I could see the sparkle in her eye demanding more information.

“How does she already know?!,” I said with a sputter. “It happened literally a minute ago and Goldshanks was the only other person there!”

Kamila shrugged. “Beatrice has her ways.”

“She sure does,” I said while slowly shaking my head. “Because she’s spot-on.”

My co-worker looked at me expectantly to continue, and I obliged her.

“I got hard evidence that he was the traitor and tried to confront him, but… I didn’t get the chance to lay out my accusation before he, uh, reacted violently-”

“Pulled out a gun!” exclaimed Beatrice as she ran up to the two of us.

Kamila’s eyes went wide as she looked between the two of us, but soon let out a groan as she put a hand to her forehead.

I looked over to the newcomer and had to ask, “how’d you-”

“I have my ways,” replied Beatrice with a smirk and wink. “I also asked one of the police officers who’s taking a statement from Goldshanks.”

The conversation quieted down for a moment as we collected

ourselves.

“You put yourself in a lot of harm’s way for the casino,” said Kamila finally. “You’re not trying to overdo proving yourself to me, are you? Because those benefits are going to depreciate very quickly.”

“I mean, I’m not doing it for you insofar as I’m doing it for the casino.”

The other two each raised an eyebrow as I continued.

“The entire world is crazy, more fucked up than I ever thought the world actually be in my wildest dreams! And even with all of these nonsensical cheaters I’ve caught this past week, Todd included, this place is still the sanest refuge around. It’s… home. And I just want to protect that.”

My co-workers stayed silent for a moment, but then Kamila nodded and flashed me the widest, most heartfelt smile I’d seen from her. “I couldn’t agree more. You know, maybe it’ll take three weeks instead of a month before I like you.”

I nodded back with a smile of my own. “Looking forward to it.”

The three of us gave each other one final look before parting and getting back to our positions, as the next round of the tournament was about to begin, police activity in the back or not.

As I got into place and looked over the casino floor, I saw a familiar sight. A well dressed man in a white suit holding a briefcase in one hand and a cell-phone in the other. His knuckles were bone white on both hands, and I could see drops of spittle exit his mouth as he spoke frantically.

“What happened to the plan?” asked Ian Wachowski.

I blinked.

“What do you mean ‘complications‘?!” he said in a hiss as his eyes widened.

I didn’t hear what he was saying, but I perfectly understood the

words coming out of his lips. How was I-

[Skill Level Up! Situational Awareness lv 9 -> 10]

[Situational Awareness Perk Obtained! Lip Reading]

Honestly, it felt like a stretch, being aware enough of my surroundings to somehow read lips. But at the same time, it felt like something in line with what the System would provide.

“If it’s going to help me keep this place safe, then I’m all for it,” I whispered to myself with a shrug before refocusing back on Ian.

“Oh… oh god…” said the traitor as the color visibly drained out of his face to match the complexion of his knuckles. He quickly shook it off with a deep breath however and replied with a snarl, “It’s too late, we can’t change things now. Just tell me who I should be watching out for here. …ok, got it.”

I expected the man who was top military brass to keep his cool and calmly walk over to his table, but he surprised me and gave a quick scan around the room then and there. Ever the professional however, he never let his sight stay on any one person for too long. Eventually, he composed himself and took his seat.

While the television announcers began to speak up shortly after, I started to consider Ian’s words on the phone.

He was definitely scared. His facial expressions and mannerisms gave that away, no need to consider his words. But of his words, he implied it was too late to change anything about his plan.

I narrowed my eyes and felt my heartbeat begin to accelerate. Him being in a rush, asking about who to watch out for and immediately scanning the room…

“It’s happening here and now!”

My face was wrung in a fit of frustration.

“*[Detect Cheating]*,” I said, finally calling forth the Skill I should have when I first saw the man today.

Detect Cheating (lv 20)
Target Ian Wachowski
Method Details of Secret Project: Special Individual Survey TEchnological Mechanism
Victim United States Government

All that grinding from the night before paid off, these were details I could pass on to give my tip to the authorities some legitimacy!

A thin smile began to form on my lips, but a terrible weight was still causing the rest of my face to sag.

Sure, the authorities might be able to act on the tip. Eventually.

Whatever the traitor was planning would happen today. Here. In Goldshanks' casino.

My home.

If it eventually came out that this was the site of him selling off government secrets, what would happen to this place? What would happen to Goldshanks, and the others?

I gulped.

Perhaps the only way to keep this place safe was to also interfere with the deal? At least do something to keep it from happening here or during the tournament? And besides, this was the best way to make that son of a bitch **pay** for dragging my boss and the rest of us into this!

My eyes darted over to Ian's briefcase, which my Skill had pointed out to me from the very beginning. The secrets he wanted to sell were in there, I just knew it, and that was the key to stopping this whole mess.

Of course, I couldn't act on that information yet. The tournament was still going on, everyone was watching, and I didn't consider myself

sneaky enough to make away with the briefcase without being noticed. The traitor might be however, but I doubted half the table and TV cameras would miss him handing over the briefcase to someone.

So I at least had time, and even better: I had a plan.

I made my way to the back of the casino, and nodded at the employees there. They didn't say anything as I went out the back, and the only looks I caught were a mix of understanding and pity. It looked like word of what happened spread fast.

"I just need some fresh air, I'll be back, don't worry," I said while flashing them an unsteady smile.

They figured it was a brave front after Todd tried to pull a gun on me. I was just anxious about what I was planning to do.

A quick drive to the office supply store and a few purchases later, and I had a briefcase that looked just like Ian's. Same brand, same color, same everything! Except for the weight, I supposed, but [Situational Awareness] gave me a decent estimate of what could be inside, namely a few manilla folders and several thick stacks of papers. So that's what was inside of my briefcase as well, albeit all of them blank.

By the time I got back, I was relieved to see that everything was the same. The round was still ongoing, and [Detect Cheating] was still making the traitor's briefcase ping with the same intensity. He hadn't handed over its contents yet, then.

As the rest of the round continued, I idly continued with my actual job here and began scanning the room for less dramatic cheaters. Surprisingly, or not so much actually, there were barely any at all! Only two of them in total, and their methods were nowhere near as dramatic as everyone else had been this week.

It looked like my interruptions on the delivery chain, along with whatever Sam did as well, was enough to keep the gear out of the cheaters' hands today.

And to my detriment, it made the rest of the round incredibly boring. I somehow kept myself focused long enough for it to become lunch. The tables had finished their games and everyone was shaking hands while the TV crews were powering down their cameras.

If there was going to be a drop-off, it would be now when nobody would notice a simple briefcase going missing. But that was also a boon for me.

I looked behind me and noticed that Ian's own security entourage was making their way towards him now. Thankfully, I was closer, and just a little quicker on my feet.

I made my way in the same direction, walking past the first of the players, and eventually in front of the man of the hour.

"Oof, sorry about that!" I said with an apologetic frown as I body-checked Ian Wachoski. Military experience or not, he flinched as my chest made contact with his frame and flew back a foot, losing his grip on his briefcase.

It fell onto the carpeted floor barely a sound.

At that moment, I dropped my own briefcase and picked up his, while hiding the fact I had a lookalike at all by using the crowds.

I heard more footsteps behind me, and felt a heavy hand on my shoulder violently yank me to the side.

I flew even further than Ian, and when I looked up, his men were giving him a look-over, the entire group ignoring me and the briefcase in my hands.

I turned around and quickly made my way to the back of the casino, hiding the attaché in a cloistered corner of the now-unused security room.

[Skill Level Up! Stealth 1 -> 3]